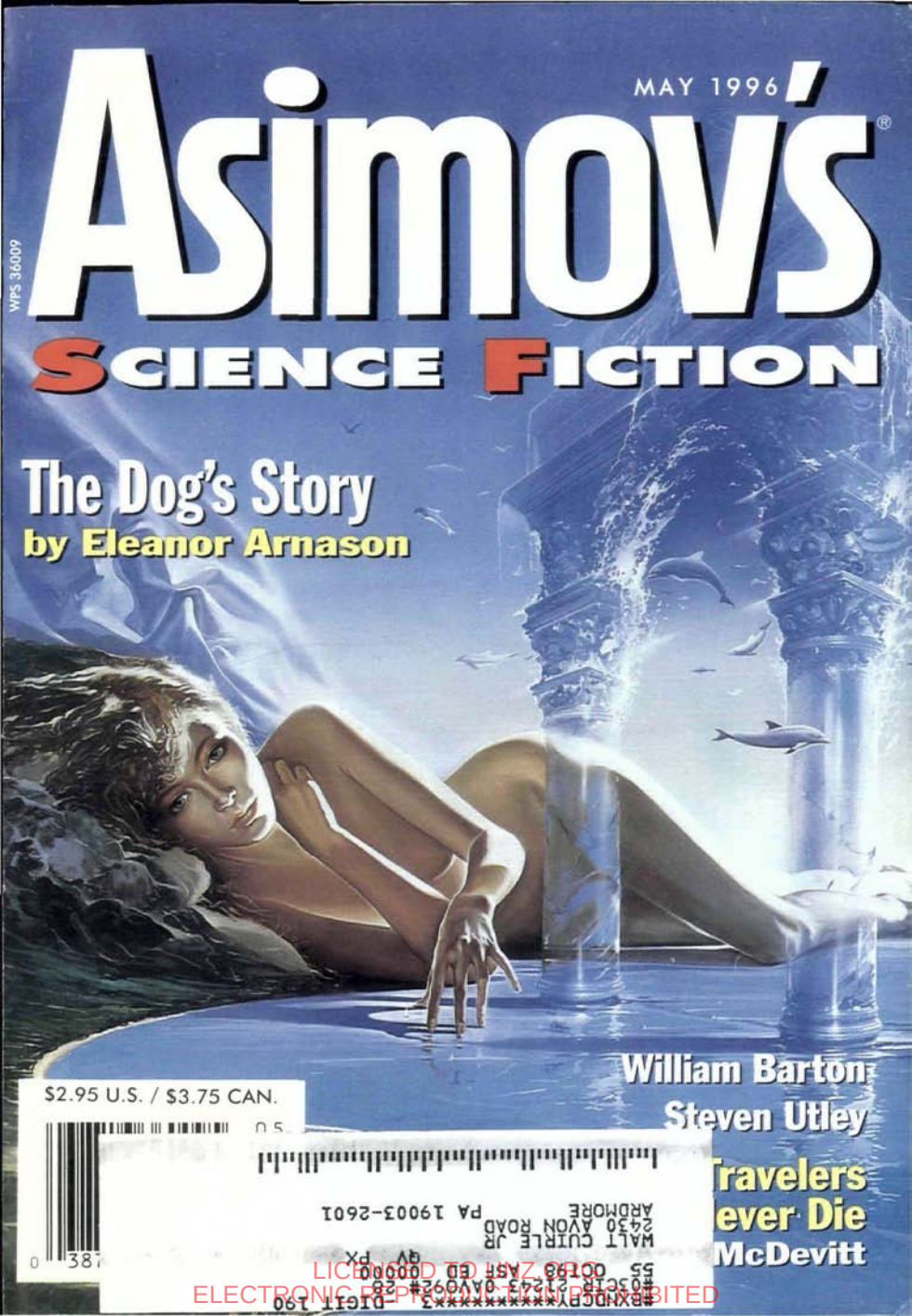

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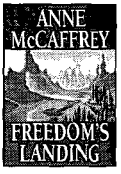

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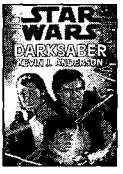

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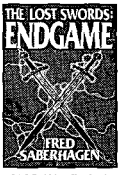

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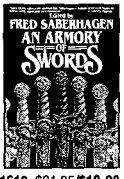

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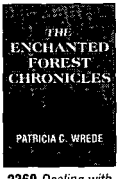

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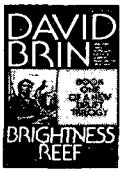

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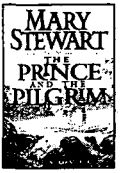

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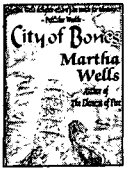

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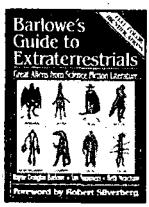

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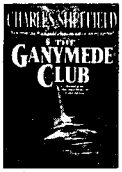

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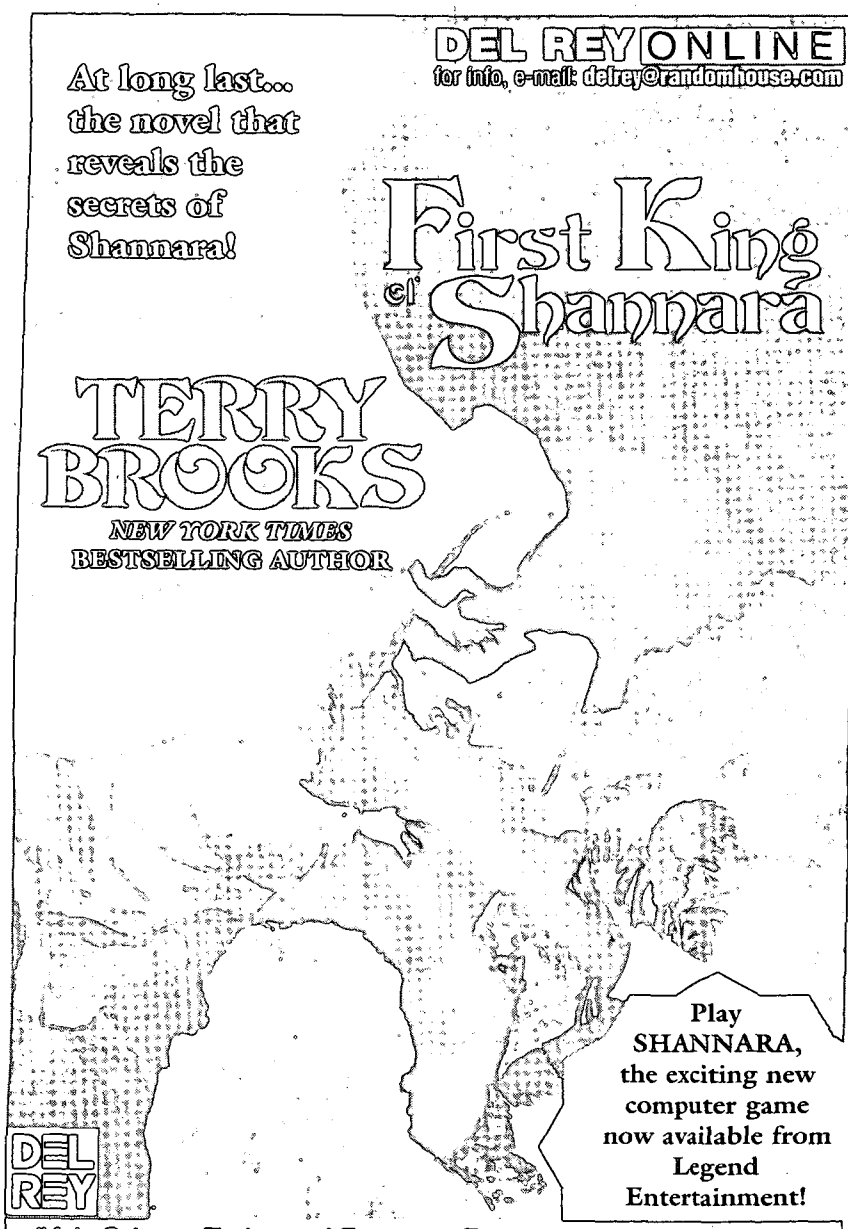

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE DINOSAUR IN THE LIVING ROOM

Some men's wives make them buy dishwashers. Mine made me buy a dinosaur. Of course, we already *had* a dishwasher. But even so—

The dinosaur is a fairly small one, as dinosaurs go. I suppose it was about the size of a cat during its pre-extinct days, and not a very large cat at that. Its name is *Mesosaurus brasiliensis,* which is not anything I would want to call a cat. (We give our cats names like Plurabelle and Kitfo and Couscous around here. I've never given a dinosaur a name. Andrew? Toby? Oscar? Nah. We'll call it *Mesosaurus* when we need to call it anything, which probably won't be often. Cats sometimes come when you call them by their names, but dinosaurs won't, so why bother?)

We came upon our *Mesosaurus* in the window of a fossil shop in Edinburgh, Scotland, a few days after the World Science Fiction Convention that was held in nearby Glasgow. Edinburgh is something of a fossilized city, though in the nicest possible way: the central part of it consists of a lot of wonderfully massive stone buildings of eighteenth and nineteenth century vintage, sturdy and elegant and surprisingly non-gloomy, and if you don't look at the street-level windows, where the souvenir kilts and mugs and cans of haggis are on display, you might easily think you had slipped backward a century or two in time. So it wasn't at all out of place to find a shop selling fossils on one of Edinburgh's pretty mid-Victorian thoroughfares.

Not that we were shopping for dinosaurs, or anything else, that evening. We were simply heading out for dinner. I had discovered an Indian restaurant called Spices, which promised (and ultimately produced) highly seasoned curries and such; and I am hopelessly addicted to fiery food of all kinds. Karen and I arrived a little early for our reservation, though, and decided to go strolling up one street and down another, peering in shop windows, before presenting ourselves at the restaurant. And there was *Mesosaurus brasiliensis* about fifty feet away in the window of a shop called Mr. Wood's Fossils.

As I said, not one of your truly enormous dinosaurs. Distinctly sub-brontosauran, in fact: an array of delicate and elegant reptilian-looking bones still contained in the stone slab in which their fossilization had taken place, a couple of geological epochs ago. The slab, maybe two feet by three feet by three inches, was neatly displayed in the middle of the window, with

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the usual fossil-shop array of ammonites and trilobites and such deployed around it.

"Look," I said mildly. "It's a little dinosaur."

That isn't the same thing as saying, "Look, there's a little dinosaur in that window and I'm going to come back first thing tomorrow and buy it." I did not, you will note, make that statement in any way. I merely called the attention of my beloved wife—the genial and widely admired science fiction writer, Karen Haber—to the fact that there was a dinosaur-containing slab in the window before us. Perhaps I was afraid she wouldn't notice it on her own. Perhaps I wanted to distract her from the shop across the way that was selling gaudy and expensive cashmere sweaters. I honestly don't remember what my motive was in pointing out the dinosaur in the window to her.

Somewhere in the middle of dinner, between the alu chatt and the lamb vindaloo, Karen said, "Of course you're going to go back there tomorrow morning and find out how much it is, aren't you?"

"I am?"

"Haven't you always wanted to own a dinosaur?" she asked.

As a matter of fact, I don't think I had. I do have a couple of minor dinosaur bones around the house, a mere knuckle or two; and there is also one coprolith—that's a dinosaur turd—that was given to me by the late, great writer Avram Davidson, who went around some science fiction convention twenty-odd years ago handing them out to

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people he thought might want to own them. (Avram also would hand out bagels at conventions on the same principle.)But no, no, I don't think I had ever specifically craved owning a complete dinosaur, fossilized or otherwise.

Erudite man that I am, I have long been aware that dinosaurs came in all sizes, from the cat-sized model on up; but generally I tend to think of them, as you undoubtedly do, as damned bulky creatures. Our house has an unusually large living room, maybe forty feet long and twenty feet wide, with a ceiling eighteen feet high, and in a technical way it could be said that such a room is large enough to contain a complete *Triceratops* skeleton, or maybe even a *Stegosaurus*. But our living room already is full of various stuff, such as couches and a table and cabinets to hold phonograph records and miscellaneous artifacts, and if we were to put a complete *Triceratops* into it we would probably have to remove certain of these that are already *in situ,* a sacrifice that I don't think I'm prepared to make and about which Karen might also have some things to say.

But what Karen was driving at, in urging me to go back to Mr. Wood's Fossils and haggle for that *Mesosaurus,* was something quite other than interior decoration. For she knew, as you are about to learn, that long before it had been my ambition to become an internationally celebrated multiple Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning science fiction writer and monthly editorial columnist for this fine magazine, I had yearned to be a paleontologist. I had been utterly obsessed with dinosaurs from about the age of seven to the age of twelve. I could imagine no finer thing to do with my life than to follow in the footsteps of E. D. Cope and O. C. Marsh and Barnum Brown and Roy Chapman Andrews and spend my days excavating primordial reptiles under the blazing sun of some remote desert land.

Well, that didn't happen, and I suppose it could be said that everything worked out for the best. Somewhere in early adolescence the course of my life became diverted from paleontology to science fiction. I lost a chance to become a really underpaid and probably barely competent academic drudge, and the world, in losing a mediocre paleontologist, gained instead *Lord Valentine's Castle* and *Dying Inside* and *Nightwings.*

What I didn't understand, in my goggle-eyed pre-pubescent fascination with the fossilized monsters in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, was just how difficult and maddening and downright dull the work of paleontologists actually is. I had some swashbuckling notion of riding around on horseback in Wyoming or Montana and the Gobi Desert and pausing, every now and then, to discover a fully articulated *Diplodocus* or *Tyrannosaurus rex.* What I didn't realize, until I actually watched some of them doing it many years later, is that the work of paleontologists consists mainly of painstak-

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ingly scraping away with tiny brushes at rock outcroppings located in forlorn and unpleasantly hot and dry parts of the world. It is very slow and difficult work of precisely the kind that I am not equipped by temperament to perform. I would, I suspect, have been a *lousy* paleontologist. How lucky for me, not to mention the admirers of *Lord Valentine's Castle* and other such books, that I never got the chance to find out!

But Karen was aware of that small-boy passion of mine for fossils. And she thought it would be completely appropriate for me, out of affection for the irritatingly bright small boy I had been some fifty years ago, to buy him a little dinosaur of his very own.

She was, of course, completely right. I *deserved* that dinosaur. It was the perfect gift for the younger self that I still carry around encapsulated within me.

But I am no longer a small boy, basically, and I live in a practical world of economic realities. On the evening we saw the *Mesosaurus* in Mr. Wood's window, Karen and I had been at large in the British Isles for a week and a half. The sturdy old credit card had already been called into service for a lovely necklace and some earrings for the genial and widely admired Ms. Haber, and for a couple of medieval Persian ceramic items for our collection of medieval Persian ceramic things, and a pseudo-Egyptian Wedgwood bowl with a terrific pseudo-Egyptian crocodile on top. We had also been running up hotel bills, taxi fare, three meals a day, and stuff like that. I had no idea how much that dinosaur in the window would cost, but what was at the back of my mind was that maybe it was time for us to stop buying things, for a little while, at least.

On the other hand—a dinosaur of my very own—

Karen had known my mind better than I had, on this one. We were, naturally, back at Mr. Wood's Fossils fifteen minutes before it opened the following morning. And by five minutes after ten that morning I was inside, discussing the cost of *Mesosaurus brasiliensis* with the clerk.

I won't tell you what it cost. That would be unseemly. You want to know how much dinosaurs cost these days in Edinburgh, go there yourself and find out. I'll tell you only that *Mesosaurus brasiliensis* cost me more than a Sony Walkman would and less than a state-of-the-art computer with built-in CD-ROM and stuff.

It arrived at our door a week after our return from Great Britain. We aren't sure quite where to put it, just yet, and so we have it casually leaning against a wall in the living room. It doesn't take up nearly as much space as our friends who hear that we own a dinosaur now probably think it does And, sooner or later, we'll find the perfectly appropriate place for it.

But Karen was altogether right. I'm very much the sort of guy who should have a dinosaur of his very own. And now I do. ●

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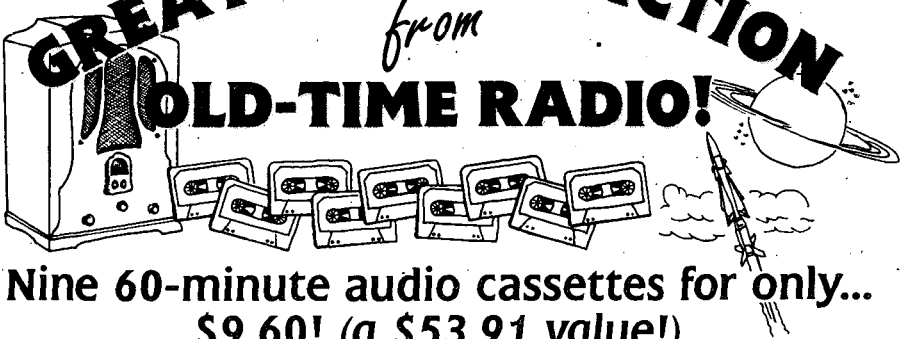

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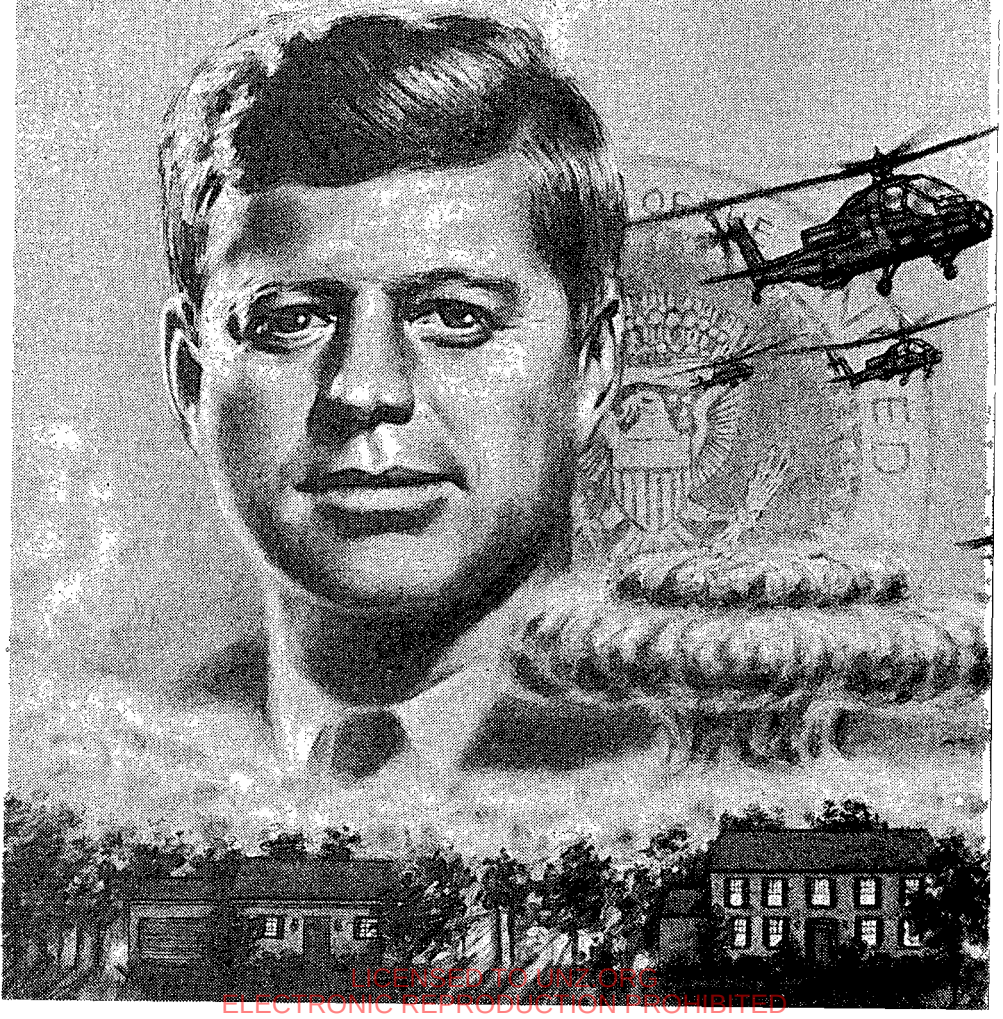
William Barton was born in Boston, and now resides in Garner, North Carolina, with his wife Kathleen. As an engineering technician specializing in military and industrial technology, he once worked on the nation's nuclear submarine fleet for the Department of Defense. Currently a free-lance writer and computer consultant, Mr. Barton's novels include *Hunting on Kunderer*, *A Plague of All Cowards*, and *When Heaven Fell*. Soon to appear are *The Transmigration of Souls* and a collaborative novel with Michael Capobianco, *Alpha Centauri*. "Age of Aquarius" is his first story for *Asimov's*.

Illustration by John Stevens



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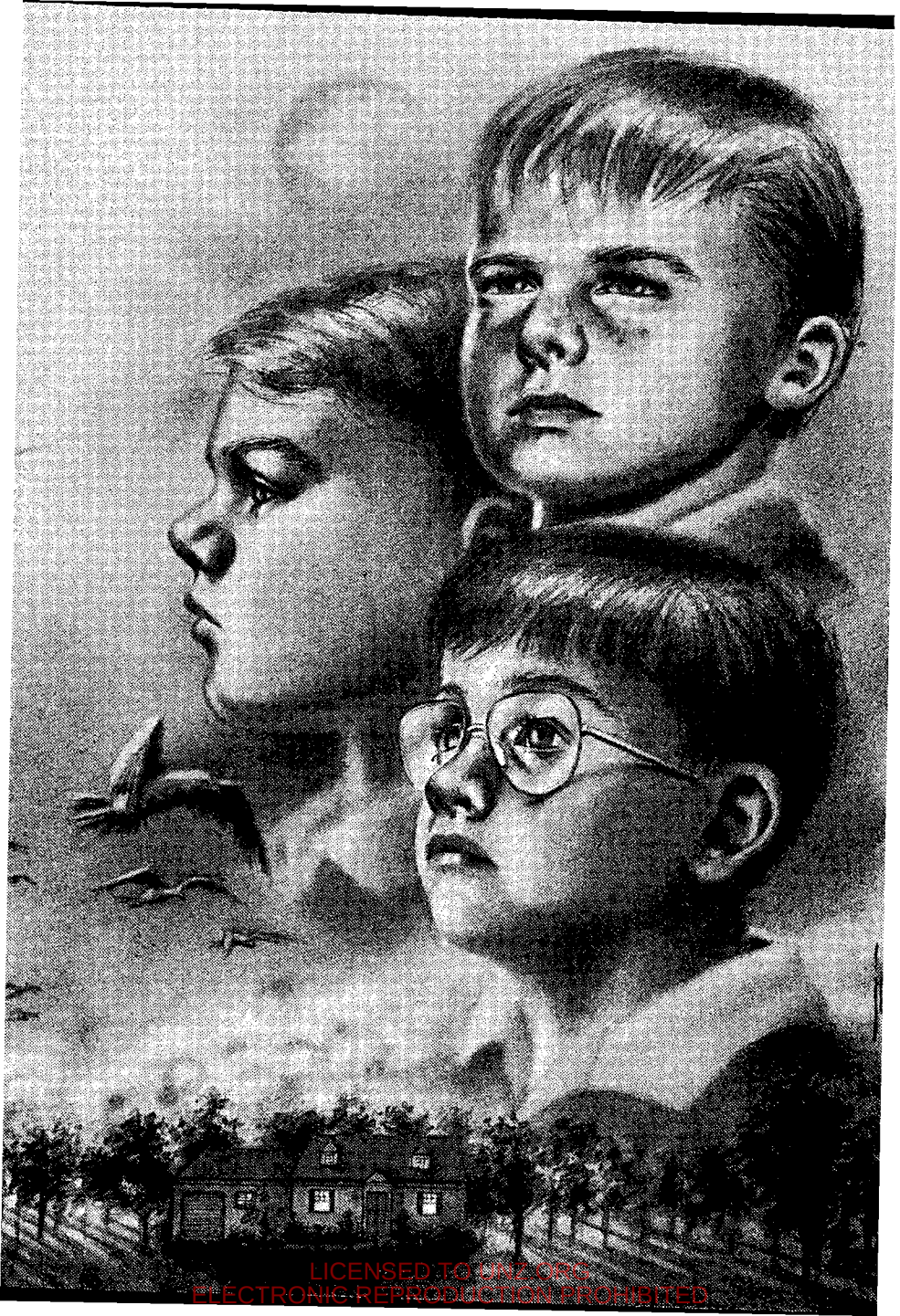

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It was hot and dusty as we walked across the vacant lot behind the Rexall drugstore on Route 123 in Woodbridge, Virginia, typical of the weather that had dominated the whole summer of 1962. There was a high haze that made the cloudless blue sky look pale and tawny, temperature up around ninety-five, our skins cooled just a bit by a low, steady breeze, the soft, inconstant rushing sound of all the dark green leaves in all the full summer trees rubbing up against each other.

We three. Musketeers our idiot teachers liked to call us, but that wasn't part of our cultural surround. Not then. I wasn't to find and read a copy of that book for a decade, though I'd seen an old movie or two and knew what they meant. Athos? Porthos? Aramis? Not us. And who would be our D'Artagnan? No one. Larry Pernotto, who was tall and fat, liked to call himself Tars Tarkas. Neal Dixon, short, blond, already muscular, just had to be Gahan of Gathol. And I? Ghek the Kaldane. Ghek the Monster, whose hideous head could detach itself and crawl away on spidery legs, leaving its nameless *rykor* body to fend for itself.

At least when I was Ghek the Kaldane I didn't have to be Burke the Jerk, slender but flabby, nondescript but for a big nose and crooked yellow teeth.

They were my friends, at least in part, maybe wholly because they loved the things I loved, playing in the woods, pretending we were . . . what? Elsewhere? Anywhere other than Marumsco Village, pretending it was anywhere, anywhen other than America the Boring in the not-quite-finished aftermath of the 1950s.

We went into the drugstore, store air conditioned, though that wasn't quite universal yet, air not-quite cooled by a not-quite-adequate unit, ceiling fans stirring the air into a gentle swirl of breeze. We headed for the newsstand in the corner, ritual stop number one—later we'd be at the fountain and the odd-smelling, heavily rouged, wrinkle-faced old woman with the illegible name-tag would serve us the usual things. I'd have a strange-tasting lime rikkee in a tall, frosted glass, soda-water so cold it'd hurt my throat, while Neal drank a root beer and Larry would slurp his way through to the dregs of a chocolate Coke. The old lady used to laugh when she brought it to him, Coke-foam soiled by the syrup, looking like something you might find in the gutter after a rainstorm.

"Sudsy shit" was what Neal called it. Larry would just give him that bemused look, not quite a laugh, a sly look, as if he knew something we didn't, and suck on the straw, eyes not quite focused, like the look on my dog's face when he licks his own pecker.

Now, Larry stood in the corner, surreptitiously flipping through the latest *Playboy,* eyes half-lidded, face expressionless as he took in expanses of smooth haunch and glimpsed those rosy-nippled tits. I was always too embarrassed to do that, though I wanted to, had to pretend it wasn't happening, stand by the comics rack, turning the carousel.

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Magnus, Robot Fighter, 4000 A.D., The world-city of North Am. Leeja, Senator Clane's daughter, with a gauzy, almost see-through blouse. A-1, the steak-sauce robot? Or was it 1-A? Maybe they used Lea & Perrins in 4000 A.D. Gold Key, all right. Magnus, Tarzan, *Space Family Robinson, Turok, Son of Stone.* It took a genius to think of that one. God damn it, a pair of Neolithic pre-Columbian American Indians thrown into a Paleolithic Lost World, world of Caucasian cave men and anachronistic dinosaurs . . .

Neal said, "Hey, Alan, look at this." He was holding up a copy of the Washington *Post.* Two handsome, alien-looking men on the front page. Andrian Nikolaev, Pavel Popovich. Vostok III. Vostok IV. Orbited the Earth sixty-four times. Orbited the Earth forty-eight times. "Vostok III," the subhead explained, "traveled 1,600,000 miles in four days."

Larry said, "That's three round trips to the Moon, right?"

I nodded. "Guess they're ready . . ." The news story was smug, in a way, American media intellectuals glad to see the can-do boys shown up by bark-sandaled, cabbage-eating Rooskis. Comparing this feat, *millions* of miles, *two* ships orbiting together, to our most recent space "spectacular," Scott Carpenter's mighty three-orbit voyage.

Or.

Or the cover story on the *Star.* I picked up the other paper and looked at it. Peculiar headline: "War by Christmas?" Odd, cold thought. War. Like John Wayne in *Wings of the Navy?* Maybe not. Imagine myself standing out on the lawn, in the backyard of my parents' home at 103 Staggs Court. Flash of light in the sky. Everything suddenly on fire. House blowing away on a hot nuclear wind.

"When it comes," the TV voice had said, "the living will envy the dead."

Universal destruction. That's what they said.

Neal was looking over my shoulder now. Eyes serious, face flat and expressionless. Neal's father was a Marine officer, a major, stationed at nearby Quantico. Just maybe, Neal knew something the rest of us didn't.

"You think?"

He shrugged, eyes far away. "Maybe." He gestured at the paper. "Maybe not like that. I dunno. Maybe more like Korea. They, uh, might be sending my dad to southeast Asia soon. Laos. Viet Nam. I dunno." He swallowed and looked away. "Hey, you read that stuff about Project Gemini in *Life?*"

"Yeah." They were curtailing Project Mercury, cutting the last two flights, clearing the decks for the two-man ships which, they hoped, would begin flying by the spring of 1964.

"Wonder what the Russians'll be up to by then?"

"Maybe they'll be on the Moon by then."

"Maybe."

* * *

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By late October summer was gone, fall weather come and gone, and the trees were bare, the skies gray with the promise of an early winter. It was the time the three of us had always liked the best, though it grew dark too early.

It was cool outside, just right for playing after school, though this was a rainier fall than most. We could pretend we were on Venus, a magic world of gray on gray on gray, ignoring the lack of tropical weather, pretending it was a cold Venus, a Venus all our own. Anyway, Mariner II, launched in August, would soon show what the real Venus was like, would arrive there in December for its quick flyby.

Nice to dream about, to dream that they'd find . . . something. Something to make the world just a little bit nicer. Maybe when Mariners III and IV went to Mars, year after next, it'd be a little more interesting. Pictures, after all . . . Imagine, if Barsoom turned out to be true.

Besides, we were catching up to the Russians. Wally Schirra had just flown his six-orbit flight; next up Gordon Cooper and a *whole day* in space. What a laugh.

School over, playing over, friends gone home, dark outside, mother in the kitchen cooking the dinner, lots of sizzling sounds, food fried in margarine, fried, broiled, boiled, smell of pork and cabbage, our family half Anglo-Irish, the rest Eastern European. Lots of pork and cabbage and potatoes.

My father sat on the couch, frowning, absorbed in himself, watching Cronkite on our old magenta metal Magnavox black-and-white, which we'd had for almost ten years. "Jesus *Christ* . . ."

I looked up from the floor, where I was reading a new Ace paperback of *The Moon Maid,* saw my father sitting forward on the couch, eyes wide. On TV was a gray ocean scene, broad daylight, the Caribbean, floating in it an American warship, part of the fleet supposedly blockading Cuba. I hadn't been paying that much attention, too much trouble in school, trouble with the other kids, to be interested in some adult world where people killed each other for reasons that just seemed stupid.

Flash of colorless fire leaping out over the gray water, boil of greasy-looking smoke, something splashing in the sea just beyond the freighter's bow—view of the freighter continuing on its way, disappearing over the horizon.

"Margie!"

My mother came out of the kitchen, small, thin, dark-haired woman, pretty I supposed since she wasn't even thirty yet, holding a spatula in one hand, harassed-looking, a little angry. "What . . ."

He gestured at the TV and her anger faded, replaced by a thin-lipped, hard expression. "Oh, Don . . ." She came and sat by his side, the two of them suddenly closer together than they usually sat.

I sat up, leaning against one arm of the couch, folding a page corner in

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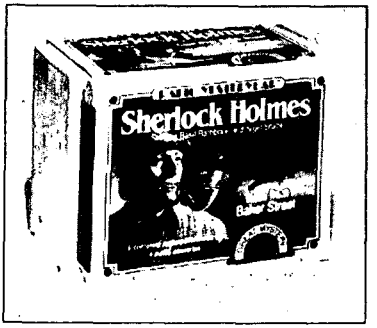

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the book to mark my place, shutting it, trying to figure out what was going on. Missiles in Cuba, Cuba blockaded, Kennedy giving speeches, my parents listening, I supposed, because they were Democrats, where they'd always ignored Eisenhower, or made fun of him, "that bald old coot . . ."

Eisenhower on TV, holding up a pathetic little nose cone in the wake of Sputnik I, calling it an "artificial comet"—my father looking at the TV then, quizzical. Comet?—Eisenhower on TV giving his farewell address, suddenly telling everyone to beware of the military-industrial complex, whatever that was. Maybe just another artificial comet, the bald old coot.

Kennedy on TV now, his skinny, rabbit-faced brother beside him, bespectacled, old-fashioned-looking Mr. MacNamara behind them both. Telling us he was giving Khrushchev just three weeks to get his damned missiles out of Cuba. Or else.

My father scratched his whiskery chin. "Or else what? Three weeks . . . Jesus, that's just before Thanksgiving."

My mother looked at him, eyes dark with concern. "Maybe we shouldn't . . ."

I always looked forward to Thanksgiving. We'd take off, drive our '59 Chevy Biscayne up to Boston for Thanksgiving dinner with all the relatives. I wondered if it'd be different this year, now that Grandpa was dead. My parents were still looking at each other. Maybe we shouldn't . . .

And my mother jumped up, dashing for the kitchen, "Jesus, the *dinner!*"

Hmh. Well-done tonight, I supposed, looking away from the TV, out the window at darkness. Anyway, the events going on in Vah-Nah, the adventures of Julian and Orthis and dear, sweet Nah-ee-Lah, were a lot more interesting than anything Walter Cronkite could possibly have to say.

In the morning, three days before Thanksgiving break was due to start, it snowed while we were at school, kids laughing, lesson disrupted, while tiny white flakes drifted down out of a featureless, steely looking sky, dusting the red clay surrounding the blacktop playground, dusting the withered brown grass, falling on the scrubby little pine trees that bordered the clear area. There were little tunnels through the underbrush down there, places where kids had played, mashing everything into the ground, exposing bare dirt. Good places to hide.

Miss Johnson, who was, we knew, young and pretty, went and stood by the window, opened the shades the rest of the way. Wistful look. Was she hoping it'd snow enough for them to send us all home? Teachers didn't get to go home on snow days, not unless the weather were really bad; they had to stay and work, grading papers, whatever it was they did when they weren't teaching, but still . . .

We'd heard she was going to get married over Christmas break, all the

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little girls were excited by that, excited enough to find out we'd come back in January to find our teacher named Mrs. Pugh. When I heard that, I wondered how hard it was for her to decide to marry the guy, knowing what would happen with the kids.

Maybe not hard at all. Sometimes, hearing noises from my parents' room, after bedtime, noises that stood for the things boys would talk about, not wanting to giggle like girls, failing, giggling anyway, trying to talk out the details from what we knew, from earlier childhood games, from guesses, from sneaking looks at pictures owned by your coarser sort of dad.

So I sat looking at Miss Johnson, trying to imagine her doing those things with Mr. Pugh, whoever he was, that wistful look on her face. Maybe she wasn't thinking about the snow at all. Maybe just wishing she was married to Mr. Pugh already, and that it was nighttime right now. The snow stopped, and the sky started to brighten, turning white. By fifteen minutes before lunch period, the clouds were starting to rip apart, patches of bright blue showing through the shreds. We studied arithmetic, complex fractions I was really bad at, then grammar, where I was worse, then geography, where I was best in the class. No one seemed to care, geography not an important subject at all. After lunch, we'd study science, where I did okay, then art, which I liked but was bad at, finally PE, so I could go home sweaty and smelling bad.

The PA speaker went "click." Miss Johnson stopped speaking immediately, a slightly nervous look on her face, turning to look at the box above the door. Sometimes the principal would listen in, monitor the classes.

A voice, a throat clearing, Mr. Kildea's voice. We were all scared to death of him, thin, angry-looking whippet of a man, a man whom we'd been sent to, when he was vice-principal, when we needed to be whipped. Which was, always, the way old Mr. Parsons, principal back then, had said it: "If you do this again," stern, stern look, "Mr. Kildea will *whip* you!"

Now, Mr. Parsons was retired and Mr. Kildea was principal. Mr. Kill-Me, we called him.

Throat clearing over the PA system, then Mr. Kildea said, "We will have a civil defense drill now, after which school will be dismissed."

Delighted laughter from the kids, Miss Johnson smiling, motioning for them to be silent. In a civil defense drill, the teachers would go home too. You could hear cheering from the hallway, from the open doors of other classrooms.

"DUCK AND COVER!"

We cowered under our desks, grinning at each other, snickering, and I heard a thump from the front of the room, Miss Johnson bumping her head as she tried to get under her own desk.

Imagine. Imagine. Brilliant light flaring from outside, glass shattering

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and ripping through the room, flensing us all just moments before the ceiling fell in. Would my little desk protect me, leaving me encased in some little, dark vacuole, so I could suffocate, or maybe just bleed to death in peace?

What would Miss Johnson think about, dying under her own desk? Mr. Pugh? Would she think about all the fun things she hadn't gotten to do with him yet? The bell rang, telling us to go home.

The three of us stood together on the hill overlooking the playground beside Greenacre Drive, looking down the wooden steps at the school. It was a brilliant, clear day now, quite cold really, cold enough that our breaths made little plumes of smoke, like we had cigarettes going, which was what some of the younger kids liked to pretend.

Children were streaming out of the school, walkers like us heading off in all directions, riders lining up outside, monitored by patrols and duty teachers, waiting to get on their buses. There was a group of teachers over by the parking lot, standing together, talking, each one making his or her own little steam-jet of breath. Talking about what? Probably what they were going to do when they got home, with this little bit of free time. Unlike snow days, civil defense days didn't have to be made up at the end of the year or on Saturday.

Miss Johnson was standing with them, talking to Mrs. Ellis. Probably telling her all about Mr. Pugh. Maybe telling her about all the fun things they were going to do together. Mrs. Ellis, who'd been married for a long time and had three kids of her own, would doubtless be aware of all the details.

The side door to the building popped open and Mr. Leisure came running out, running toward the parking lot. Neal nudged me. "What the hell's wrong with him?"

I shrugged. "Who knows. Mr. Leisure . . ." Larry snickered. He and I had both had Mr. Leisure last year, a young guy, really strange and goofy, with a very short crew cut. He seemed like the sort of guy who'd probably been teased a lot as a kid and I always wondered what made him want to teach school. Maybe it felt like revenge.

He ran across the parking lot to where the other teachers were standing, stopped, waving his arms, mouth flapping like mad. They all seemed to freeze, freeze still for just a moment, then the group exploded, teachers running for their cars.

Over by the road, one of the buses suddenly pulled out of line, turning, going the wrong way up the driveway, with its door open, trailed by kids, running kids who hadn't had a chance to get on. Up on the street, it accelerated, running the stop sign at the head of Botts Avenue.

Neal looked down at running teachers, fleeing buses, milling children, looked at us, face uneasy, and said, "Maybe we better go home now."

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Larry said, "What *for?* Let's go down the drugstore. Or maybe over to the creek."

Neal: "Well. Um." Another uneasy look. "I need to ask my mom."

Come to that, I'd need to ask my mom too. "Let's go down to Larry's house. We can phone from there." Larry's parents both worked, so no one would be home. His house made a good base of operations.

"Okay."

We started to walk, the sky very clear and cold blue overhead, kids on both sides of the road, laughing, skipping, glad to be out of school. This is silly, I thought. What if there *was* a war now? What good would it do for us to be out here, walking home? See the mighty explosions. . . . See the winds of nuclear fire sweep me away. . . .

We got about to the crest of the hill, to where we could see Larry's house at the top of the next hill, when light blinked in our faces, blinked once, waited a few long seconds, then blinked again. All up and down Greenacre Drive, streetlights went on, glowing a strange red-orange, brightening a bit, then dimming, going out again.

It was very quiet out, as if the wind had stopped blowing.

"What the heck. . . ?" Larry was looking up at them, puzzled. "That was *weird. . . .*"

Neal was standing still, then suddenly turning on his heel, facing a little east of due north. "*There.*" Pointing.

More light coming over trees, not like sunrise, not making the sky turn orange or anything, just faraway light shining through the trees.

"THERE!" Larry shouted, "over *THERE!*"

More light, a little to the west, not quite as bright as the first, as if farther away.

Bewildered, I turned and looked at Neal, was shocked to see tears in his eyes. "My dad," he whispered. He looked at me then, face agonized. "My dad's at Guantanamo. . . ."

Then he turned and ran, off down the street, very fast, crossing over to the other side, dodging a parked car, disappearing over the crest of the hill, footsteps fading fast. Neal was in good shape. I knew he'd be able to run the full two miles to his house, where his mother would be waiting.

Larry turned to me. "What's going on, Alan?"

Larry wasn't stupid. He had to know too. It just didn't seem real.

I stood watching two fat brown-orange columns bulge up in the north, wondering myself what was going on. Light was playing inside them, a sullen red glow, like the light that glowed inside dying embers. Flickering though, on off, on off. . . .

Where the hell are the mushroom clouds? Where's the firestorm? Are we dead already? Should we look for survivors so they can start to envy us?

Still watching a remote, silent disaster, I said, "I dunno. We better get up to your house. I want to call my mom."

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And Larry's face was suddenly sober, suddenly full of knowledge. "We better get inside anyway. There's . . . bound to be fallout sooner or later."

And, I suddenly realized, the streets were empty around us. Everyone else had gone indoors.

Things were a little crazy for a few days after that. We went down to Larry's house, where I tried to call my mom, but the phones were out. Not a dead line, like you got when the local system went down, just a fuzz of static like the TV makes when you turn it on in the middle of the night. I thought of staying for a while, then decided I'd better go home. My mom would be frantic. Besides, there was a little window of opportunity now, while the fallout clouds were still developing; and any prompt radiation from those faraway explosions had gone right through us while we stood and watched. Just thinking about that made my skin crawl.

I left Larry sitting nervously on the couch with his TV on, showing a pattern of colored static where WTTG-5 should have been. There was nothing on the radio either, FM sounding a lot like shortwave just then. The walk home, less than a mile, made me nervous too. Those two columns of smoke in the north had gotten tall and were starting to bend over toward the east.

There were cars in the street now, people driving too fast, and I could hear horns honking from the direction of Route 1.

My mom was frantic when I got there, grabbing me as I came through the door, thank-Godding, and our TV was on too, showing black and white static. My parents had been talking about getting a color TV for a while now, they weren't quite as expensive as new cars, and I'd been hoping to see us get one for Christmas, hoping the old Magnavox would wind up in my room. We waited, and Mom kept going in the kitchen, switching from one Conelrad frequency to the other, hoping to hear something.

Around five o'clock, when it was starting to get dark outside, she started supper, reheating beef stew on the stove, putting brown 'n' serve rolls in the oven, while we waited for Dad, who usually got home about quarter after. The power went off, TV going dead, radio going dead, lights going out, electric stove fading just before the stuff would've been ready anyway. And Dad didn't show up.

We ate dinner by candlelight, Mom starting a fire in the fireplace, reminding me of the big snowstorm two winters back, when Marumsco Village had been without power for three days, and we waited, and looked out the window. Dark out there, dark and still. Stars in the sky, wisps of cloud, no Moon; I didn't know whether it was new, a sliver hiding somewhere in the sky or just down. No lights from the other houses. No streetlights. No airplanes overhead. The headlights from an occasional car cruising slowly down Carter Lane.

Seven o'clock, me suddenly realizing I'd miss *Bullwinkle*. Nine o'clock,

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bedtime, Mom still standing at the window, looking out, crying now. I went to sleep on the couch around then.

When I woke up in the morning the fire was down to embers and it was snowing outside. I went to the window and looked out, saw our car in the driveway, blue tailfins dusted with white, realized Dad had come home some time during the night. The wintry grass on the front lawn was starting to get covered, the sky white, those featureless white clouds you see in a snowstorm you know is going to last a while. No one on the street. No one at all. Usually, this would bring the kids out fast, especially on a schoolless morning.

Is it fallout? I tried to look closely. Big flakes now, fluttering as they fell, looking a little bit like ash maybe, but very white. The flakes that fell on the brick windowsill were melting away to splotches of water. Snow. Just snow. It was starting to stick on the street now, whitening the blacktop, meaning it had gotten colder outside, cold enough to bring the blacktop down to freezing. I touched the window glass. Cold.

I suddenly remembered some stuff from a movie I'd seen a couple of years back. *On the Beach*. That final scene, of the submarine putting out to sea, the lonely woman watching from a distant headland, dying, then all those long views of empty streets, wind blowing newspapers along the gutter. The whole world a grave. Radiation. Giving me the creeps right now.

My parents' door was shut. I went and stood in the hallway, wanting to knock, to go in and be with them, but I listened instead. Soft little noises. A brief murmur. The sound of the bed frame shifting. Shifting again. Again. Another murmur, something like a sigh. I went back to the living room and resumed staring out the window. They'd come out when they were done.

My parents kept me in for a few days, stayed in themselves, staring out the window apprehensively, waiting, I supposed, for the sky to fall, watching the almost-empty streets. Cars continued to go by, an occasional pedestrian striding quickly along the sidewalk. No kids.

My father told the story of his eighteen-hour commute home from work, told it over and over. His office in the Bureau of Mines building in DC suddenly shuddering, plaster cracking on the walls, window breaking, secretary screaming. Bright light suffusing the streets outside, light from the northeast, then dimmer light from almost due north. What the Hell. . . ?

People in the hallways, boiling down the stairs, headed for the basement shelter, following the little trefoil signs. Dad started after them, got to the ground floor, stood in the foyer, where the big glass doors had been, looking out on a street full of people and cars, and started to think.

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DC was still there and so was he. Those bombs hadn't been anywhere real nearby. Maybe that was Baltimore and Philadelphia being blown to bits. In which case . . .

So he started for home.

Grinning: "I must've gotten stuck fifteen times, trying to go around wrecks on Shirley Highway! Good thing I managed to talk John and Karl into coming with me . . ." And he had, apparently, dropped them at their own houses on the way home.

I remembered a funny poster I'd seen in the hallway outside my dad's office. It was the one that began, "In case of nuclear attack . . ." and ended, ". . . then kiss your ass good-bye." Dad and his friends seemed to think it was a riot.

We ate lunch together, then he and Mom went back to bed for a while. I let Lucky, my little black-and-white cocker spaniel, out of the basement, where my mother insisted he be kept, and fed him, played with him a bit, and sat, looking out the window. Maybe TV would come back. Or I could get down the drugstore and spend my allowance on some of the new Burroughs books that Ace was supposed to be bringing out.

Two days, then three, and we were lucky at that. Dad was a geologist and still had a functioning Geiger counter stashed in the basement, from the days when he'd been with the USGS, had spent his summers working the Colorado Plateau. He kept poking its nose out the back door, testing. Nothing, nothing, and nothing again. Then the cupboards were empty and Dad said, "God damn it. Go ahead out and play, Alan." Then he loaded up his hunting rifle, got in the car, and went grocery shopping.

I went over to Larry's house first and was glad to see his parents had made it home too. They were pretty cold, lacking a fireplace, house heated by a charcoal hibachi they'd set up on the kitchen stove, next to a partly open window. Good enough for cooking, not much heat. We went over to Neal's house then, but there was no one home, station wagon missing from their driveway.

By January, it became clear things weren't going to get back to normal for a long time. No school, of course, and the TV never came back, nor the electricity. Dad took me shopping with him sometimes, and I guess I was really surprised to see the A&P still open. No lights, no cash registers, no meat, no frozen food, no fresh produce, but once a week a tractor trailer would pull in off Route 1 and unload canned goods. And the old bald guy, who'd been manager since the store opened here five years ago, was wearing a gun in a holster on his hip. He and some of the big boys who'd been working as baggers.

There was a big sign in the front window: CASH AND CARRY. NO FIREARMS ALLOWED. NO CHECKS. NO CREDIT. Dad kept carrying his loaded rifle, but we usually just left it locked in the car.

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MEAF1

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And radio finally did come back, a little bit, enough for us to understand, maybe, what had happened, locally, at least, sitting in the car listening to a staticky broadcast. The two bombs we'd seen had been meant for DC, one probably aimed at the White House, a few blocks from where my Dad worked, the other maybe for the Pentagon, where Larry's mother had been a secretary.

Dad laughed when he heard: "The bastards *missed!*" And so one bomb had come down in the woods north of Wheaton, Maryland, the other just south of Annapolis. Baltimore had taken one in the harbor, and something had gone off between Richmond and Petersburg, emptying both cities.

Those missiles in Cuba had come ashore too, a hundred or more small nuclear detonations scattered across the south, taking out Miami, Atlanta, places like that. Weapons from Siberia had peppered the West Coast. And a squadron of long-range bombers had penetrated along a corridor from Boston to Chicago, wiping out both cities and a number in between.

Boston. That was all our relatives. Nobody said anything. Just not real, hearing it over the staticky radio.

All told, two-hundred-and-seventy-five nuclear weapons had detonated on North America, with a total yield in excess of a hundred and thirty megatons. Damage estimates varied, hard to say, "maybe sixty million dead."

My father, staring at the radio, whispering, "And what about *them* . . ."

Now, for the good news . . .

SAC got aloft, they said, in those minutes before the attack, several hundred bombers, their tankers . . .

Saddle up, boys. Work to be done.

Four-thousand-five-hundred gravity bombs, they said, three hundred Thor IRBMs, two-hundred-and-fifty Atlas and Titan-1 ICBMs, laying down a saturation pattern from Eastern Europe, across the USSR, and on into China. Forty-one thousand megatons. Casualties unknown. Damage inestimable. Long-term results incalculable.

There was a pall of smoke, they said, drifting out over the Pacific Ocean, the forests of Siberia, the cities of East Germany and Poland and Russia and China, presumably still ablaze.

My father laughing. My mother smiling.

Guess that'll show *them*.

In March of 1963, it continued to snow heavily, and President Kennedy was assassinated by some ex-Marine named Oswald, who shot him in the face as he gave a speech in front of the Temporary White House in St. Louis.

Larry and I were playing down by the creek, dragging our way through

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waist-high drifts, holding our wooden swords, sticks we'd found, with likely enough shapes, silver duct tape making up the hilts. Ælendar and Raitearyón were slogging westward along the Great River, sneaking up on the golden spire of Infinitarian's stronghold. If we could get in there, could kill him, the forces of Venusia would triumph, could undo the ice age now gripping our gray world.

In the past, we'd had to stay down in the swampy land around the creek itself; now we could go up in most backyards. People had been leaving Marumsco Village, families loading up their cars by ones and twos, heading out, heading westward. Those who had places to go. Between the Mississippi and the Rockies, the country seemed to be intact, though it was hard to tell. Not much news on the radio, broadcasts we could pick up slowly growing rarer.

There'd been a little bit of excitement when Larry's father built a big antenna out of pieces from the abandoned rooftops of several neighbors, somehow hooked his TV to a bunch of car batteries, then picked up a fuzzy signal from Memphis. Not much to it though. And it did continue to snow.

We sat on the railing of the little bridge where Hilton Avenue went over the creek, looking down on the frozen water. Snow was starting to pile up in drifts here too. Much more and you wouldn't be able to find the creek unless you knew where to look. It seemed to be getting colder, and we'd taken to wearing sweaters under our parkas, me with too-tight long johns under my clothes, Larry with two pairs of pants.

Sitting there, tired from wading through hip-deep snow, breaths puffing out long jets of steam. It seemed to be getting dark out, like twilight, though it was only two o'clock in the afternoon.

Larry said, "The Barrs moved away this morning."

That meant Larry was the last kid living on Greenacre Drive. I'd been the last kid on Staggs Court for more than a month. "Where to?"

He shrugged. "Texas, I think. Soapy's brother's supposed to live in Dallas." Walter didn't like it when we called his father that, but we did anyway, ever since we heard it was his college nickname.

"What about your parents?"

Another shrug. "Our people all live in New York. They might be still alive, but . . ." A third shrug. New York's bombs had come down pretty far away, one up in the Catskills, the other out on Patchogue. "New York's gotta be worse than here. I guess we'll be staying put." And then he turned and looked at me, kept on looking, waiting.

I nodded slowly. "Boston's gone, but . . . We lived in Utah when I was little. My dad thinks we can take all the old camping gear and go back there, up into the mountains where there's plenty of spring water, game to hunt. We might do all right there until things get back to normal."

"That'd be cool. Think he'd let my family come?"

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Sudden hard wish. What an adventure that'd be! But . . . I shook my head. "My parents think your dad's an asshole."

Larry nodded.

After a while, we started walking up the street, looking at abandoned houses. We'd been breaking into them lately, the empty houses of our friends, looking at their stuff, playing with their toys. One guy's dad had a really great pornography collection, pictures of girls with their legs spread. I didn't even know there were such things, and Larry kept wanting to go back. I think he was taking the pictures home one at a time.

We stuck it out 'til July, then loaded up the car and drove away in the snow, Larry standing on my front steps, watching, motionless, until we turned the corner at the bottom of the street. I'm not sure whether he waved goodbye or not.

Though it should've been a quick shot, four, maybe five, days cross country to the little town of Moab, where we were sure to have friends, Dad's old work buddies from back in the fifties, it took forever to get there.

In late September, on the day of my thirteenth birthday, I crouched behind the wreck of our car, on the shoulder of some road in southern Indiana, and watched five bearded men rape my mother. My father was lying in the snow a little distance away, lying still, snow around him stained red, steam rising from the big cut across his throat, big cut that had sprayed bright blood when one of the men hit him with a machete, Dad gargling, sounding just like he always had, in the bathroom, getting ready for work. He'd fallen to his knees, holding his neck, fallen to his face, rolling, rolling . . .

My dog Lucky was a little black rag in the snow not far away. He'd come running up, barking, barking, while Dad struggled and Mom screamed, barking, barking. One of the men turned, looked down, stepped on him hard. He only cried a little bit, then he was still, while I hid under the car and tried to stay quiet, laying there, staring at my dog.

They had Mom stripped all the way naked now, two of them holding her down in the snow, while a third did what he wanted. Her skin was starting to turn red, freezing cold I imagined, and she was moaning very softly, something like words, but not words. Once, I thought I saw her head turn, her eyes open, and look toward where I was hiding. Save me? Save yourself? I couldn't tell. She shut her eyes and turned her head away.

When we didn't get out to Utah fast, Mom and I both wanted to turn around, go back to our familiar house in Marumsco Village, but Dad kept insisting we'd get there, it'd just take a little longer. Then we couldn't go back, roads to the east blocked by Federal troops, martial law rules keeping us off the main highways as we tried to work our way west. This was

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going to be our last attempt to get out of the Midwest, get across the Mississippi and on toward the mountains, Dad figuring we could try a northern route, up through Wyoming, where we heard things were getting better. Anyway, there was so much snow, people were staying away from the north.

One of the men was finished now, had his pants back up, laughing about how cold his butt had gotten during those few minutes, standing, holding a rifle, my dad's rifle, cradled in his arms, watching the man who'd taken his place. This new guy had a big, muscular butt, covered with a lot of black hair.

A curious sense of detachment then, from what was going on, as if floating, far away. I remembered what had happened a couple of years ago, when the teen-age boy who lived next door talked me into coming down into his basement, what he'd tried to get me to do.

When these men finished with Mom, they'd come search the car, taking all our stuff, and they'd find me. Maybe they'd want to do it to me, too. How much difference is there between a grown woman and a nice, sleek little boy? I didn't know.

The second man finished, kneeling between her legs, pulling up his pants, buckling his belt, zipping his fly, standing, number three taking his place, undoing his trousers, looking down at her, smiling. Mom's eyes were open again, and she stayed in the position they'd put her in, bottom having made a nice, comfortable well in the snow, looking up at him. He kneeled, lay down on her, and started.

After a while, I slid out from behind the car and started crawling away, very quietly. There were nice, thick woods, leafless trees, quite close together, only a few dozen yards away. They'd see my trail, but they might not follow me into the woods.

I spent the night lying inside a dry sewer culvert, cowering in the darkness, wishing the night would end, wishing it would last forever. Tired, cold, shuddering like I was sick. Shutting my eyes, opening them on darkness, wondering if I'd slept. And hearing that sound. Far away voices, voices of women, ghost women, wailing, high, forlorn.

I used to be afraid of the dark when I was little, when I had so much trouble sleeping. I'd wake up in the middle of the night, Oh, no! Pang of fear, looking at the luminous clock dial, two A.M., knowing it was going to happen again, that I would lie through the rest of the night, listening to the ghost women cry.

I told my parents about the voices and they laughed. Just your imagination, they said. Just the sound of trucks running at high speed down U.S. 1 . . .

But there were no trucks on the highway anymore.

Image of dark red snow, snow around my still father. Image of my

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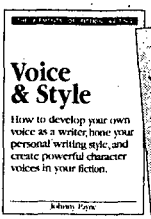
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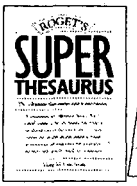

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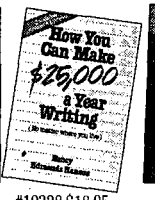

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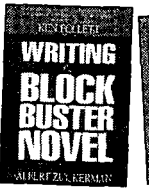

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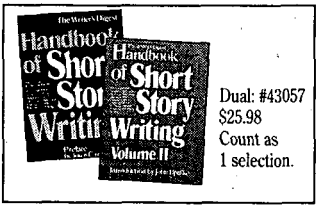

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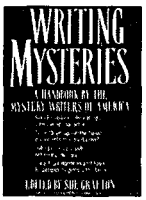

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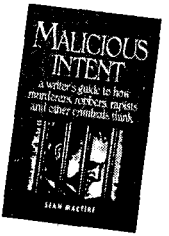

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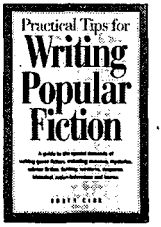

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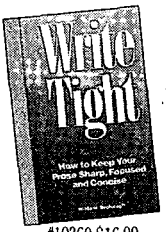

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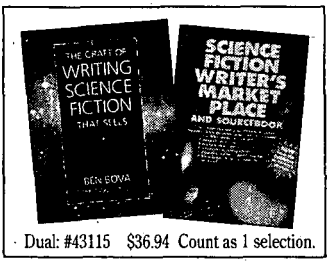

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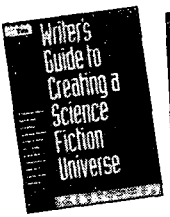

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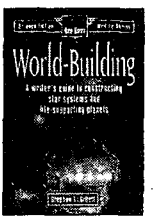

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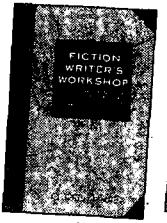

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mother's skin, reddening, reddening, as if in anticipation of the red snow that would surround her, once those men were finished. And Lucky, lying in the snow like a lost wig, just so much disembodied hair.

I wonder if they're buried now? Would they bury a dead dog?

Lucky out on the snow, motionless, while starving crows pecked out his eyes. If it was summer, there'd be ants. But summer hadn't come. Maybe it never would again.

Then, suddenly, it was day, wan gray light streaming into the pipe. I got out and stood on top of a nearby hill, looking back along my tracks, leading off through the woods, a crooked trail. If anyone was following me they'd have a pretty easy time. Go back? Go back and see what was left of my parents, my dog, see if they'd left anything I wanted in the wreck of the car? Image of red snow, of dead dog, of the way I might find Mom, sprawled naked in the snow.

I turned away, turned east, and started walking, head down, hands in my pockets. Anywhere. Anywhere but back to the car.

It took me a long damned time to walk home from Indiana. It kept snowing and snowing, me getting colder and colder, but glad I'd had a match box safe in my pocket, part of my old Cub Scout kit, when I crawled away from the car. Seventy-five wooden kitchen matches, enough to light seventy-five fires. I didn't light one every night, only when I thought it was safe, when nobody could see the smoke. It was a good thing. It took me longer than that to get home.

I decided to walk home through West Virginia, so I crossed the Ohio River at Huntington, old iron bridge still intact, cars and trucks still using it, and headed up into the hills. Not too bad. Some game animals around, things I couldn't catch. I killed some kind of rabbit by throwing a brick at his head, and he tasted pretty good. What I got used to eating was starving cats and dogs, which came up, purring, tail-wagging, looking for a handout until I broke their necks. The dogs weren't too bad, but the cats kept making me sick. Puking, diarrhea. There were a few squirrels out wandering in the snow too, also starving to death. No birds. Other than crows, I hadn't seen any birds to speak of since the day the bombs went off.

One day, walking along a ridge line above a country road, someplace, I don't know where, I found a dead guy, a frozen carcass, gnawed a little bit on the face and hands, but not too much. He had a rifle, an old Enfield .303, still set up with a bayonet mount and military clip, just as it had been used in World War I, a dozen boxes of jacketed bullets, a backpack with five pounds of Slim Jims and a big bottle of chlorine tablets.

The Slim Jims were so rich, eating just one made me nauseous, but I knew what the tablets were for and started to use them. After that, I started feeling a little better. His clothes didn't fit and they weren't too

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clean, but I took them anyway. Even those big, nasty boots, which I figured I could trade to someone else someday. If there was a someday, or someone else.

One day, I found a little girl, maybe eight years old, very thin, crouching by herself in the snow, shivering. Naked. Just looking at me, skin red from the cold, especially on her back, just the way Mom's had been. She was wet all over the insides of her legs, too, looking at me, eyes blank, just waiting. I guess she figured I'd do more of whatever had just been done to her.

And I guess I thought about it, for just a second. I'd been thinking about stuff like that a lot as I walked along in the dark, cold woods, walking home. Thinking about the magazines and pictures Larry and I had found in the empty houses. Thinking about Mom on her back in the snow, and about what those men had been doing to her.

Somewhere hereabouts would be the men who'd done whatever had been done to this little girl. Somewhere, maybe not so far away. I walked away, off into the woods away from the road, hoping I wouldn't run into them—they'd probably kill me and take my gun. I walked away, leaving her there to crouch and shiver.

Maybe those other men left my mom lying on the road when they were done, too. Maybe they hadn't killed her. Maybe she'd gotten up after a awhile, dug some clothes out of the wreck of the car, whatever the men had left for her. Maybe she saw my trail leading off into the woods, had started off after me. Maybe she was right behind me now, angry, angry at me for not trying to save her.

But, Mom, they would've killed *me*. . . .

I could feel the slap across my face, just like the slaps I got whenever I was bad. I stood looking around then, but there was nobody here. Nobody but me.

Maybe Mom, following me, would find the little girl, give her some clothes, would take care of her.

Then again, maybe she was dead, and the little girl would die too, would freeze to death in the night. I kept walking, under a dark gray sky, while it got darker and darker, and, after a while, the wind started to blow. It started snowing again, but I walked all night.

In the spring I finally got back to Marumsco Village. Real spring, the sky clear blue, soft warm wind blowing, snow melting away, filling the creeks with cold, clear, rushing water. It was, I thought, May of 1964, but I may have gotten confused somewhere along the way. April? June? I couldn't tell.

I'd come across country as much as I could, avoiding towns and cities, avoiding the highways, trying to stay away from where I thought people would be. Stay away. Stay out of trouble. Stay in the woods. In northern

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Virginia, though, I had to come out at last, crossing roads, then walking along them, to get home.

I came down the steep, winding road south of Lorton, the one that switchbacked past the old quarry, came out of the woods on the north bank of the Occoquan River. It was wider than I remembered it, swollen with meltwater, and the old wooden bridge where Route 123 had crossed was gone, nothing left of it but a couple of cracked concrete abutments.

Occoquan, old-style town, very small, crummy old buildings lining the south bank a few miles above the Route 1 bridge. Where the bridge had been. I could see it was gone too, could see Conrad Island poking up out of Belmont Bay, the Potomac a streak of shiny water just beyond.

And Occoquan was gone as well, nothing left but a few blackened ruins, jagged brick walls and stuff sticking up out of old foundations. I wonder when that happened? Old arguments, from when we moved here, when I was just seven years old. We, northerners, wanted to say Oak-a-quan, the locals insisting on Awk . . .

I went up and crossed at the ruins of the Hooes Creek Reservoir dam, jumbled concrete wreckage like so many huge rocks in the river. We used to go swimming there, and boating. Fun to row our boats up to the dam, get off onto its top, stand looking down from a dizzying height. I don't think anyone ever fell.

Long, slow walk up the steep hill of 123, which was called Occoquan Road here, past the collapsed ruins of what I remembered as ramshackle housing, places where the local blacks lived, my father pointing out their fancy cars, sneering, telling me all about the way Negroes lived, the way they thought, how alien their priorities were.

Then up Hilton Avenue to corner of Fourth Street. Stand there, heart pounding, trying to decide. Neal's house was here, dark and empty, windows smashed out. A few of the houses were burned, a few here and there, most just empty, many looking perfectly intact, as if their owners were away at work, would be home in the evening to cook supper and watch TV.

Image of myself, home from school, sitting, doing my homework at the coffee table, cartoons on the in the background. Captain Tugg. Spike Marlin. Axl Grackl. Once, Larry got a strange, flat pink pimple on the end of his nose, looking a bit like a dab of Silly Putty. We'd all taken to calling him Captain Tugg, in honor of the Captain's obviously made-up nose.

So. I really ought to go up Fourth Street to Carter Lane, then on to 103 Staggs Court. Home. House on the hill, white with blue trim, weeping willow tree in the backyard, next to the old swingset my parents had bought for me in the spring of 1958 . . .

I turned and walked up Hilton Avenue, toward the foot of Greenacre Drive.

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* * *

Walter Barr's house was gone, burned away, ruins falling into the black hole of the basement, Karl English's house next door charred but still standing. Across the street, Larry's house was okay, in better shape than Neal's had been, but not much better. His parents' 1961 VW Beetle was sitting in the driveway, tires flat, and the living room's big picture window was smashed out, jagged glass standing on the lower edge.

I stood for a while, looking, listening to the wind. Quiet here, quieter than it had ever been, the sun high and bright overhead, warm on the skin of my face, breeze pushing my hair around. Listen. Sigh of wind. Gurgle of water trickling in the gutter, running down Greenacre Drive toward the creek, where Larry and Neal and I had played for years.

I missed the sound of the traffic.

After a while, I crossed the street and went up to the door. When I pushed, it opened, not locked, not even latched. It was wet and stinky in the living room, couch mushy with rot, black mildew stains on the walls, like abstract art. Nothing in the kitchen, refrigerator door standing open, empty. Clean though, as if somebody'd tidied up right before the end. Downstairs bedroom. His parents' bed was made up, but soaked now, and mushy.

Upstairs. Larry's room, where I'd sat listening to music, enduring his fixation on the Four Seasons, talking about bullshit, weekend evenings, days when the weather was too lousy for us to play in the woods. Bed here not made. But wet. Mushy. There was a book on the nightstand, furred with mold, soft, so soft you could push a finger through it.

It was a hardcover copy of *Llana of Gathol,* a blue Grosset and Dunlap edition, binding reinforced with green tape. It was the copy from the Marumsco School library. I looked at the bookshelf. More library books, alongside the Ace paperbacks. All right. This is what Larry got up to, after I moved away.

I wonder where they went?

God. I wanted so badly for him to be here.

I went back outside then and started walking home, down the hill, toward the creek, trying hard not to cry. Failing. On the way, walking beside the creek, I found a puppy, small, brown and white, familiar looking. I took him in my arms, petted him for a while, then broke his neck.

I stood on the front steps of 103 Staggs Court for a long time, frozen, unable to go in. Just stood facing the door, dead puppy under my arm, looking through the screen at the blue-painted wood, the brass knocker, the nameplate my father'd put on a couple of years ago. Donald R. J. Burke, Jr., lying in the red snow of Indiana.

The windows were all intact, all along the front of the house, even the big pane of glass in the living room. Dark inside. Funny. If the electricity

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came back, maybe all the lights would go on, maybe even the stove, depending on how we'd left the switches. Maybe it had at some point. Maybe that was why so many houses had burned down. Not mine, though. My parents had a mania about that. Last thing, my dad had gone through the house, making sure everything was all right. For the day of our return.

I opened the screen door and tried the knob. Locked. Just the way we left it. And my key was still in my pocket, right where it had been, mixed with sixty-three cents change, the remains of my last allowance. From eighteen months ago. My hand shook, trying to prevent me from threading the lock.

Push. Turn. Push. The door swung open, silent, on hinges my father always kept carefully oiled. "So we don't sound like *Inner Sanctum* around here."

I went in.

Dark. Dusty. Sneeze.

Blue sectional sofa. Magenta Magnavox in the corner, next to the fireplace. I put the puppy down on the hearth. Brass fittings. Mesh cover closed, blackened ashes the remains of our last cooking fire. Dry logs in the rack by the door. Kindling in the box, pile of newspapers nearby.

Turn. My mother's old upright piano, a bequest from her grandmother, who'd been still alive, living in a nursing home in Boston, ninety years old the day . . .

Flicker. Flicker. Two strobes of bright light in the north, changing things.

Kitchen clean, just the way we left it, refrigerator door propped open a bit, "so we don't grow mold."

I walked down the hallway, dust puffing out of the carpet at every footfall, pale clouds, not a lot, not really, exaggerated because it shouldn't be here at all. My mother vacuums *every day*. . . .

Mother lying in the snow, naked, skin of her back reddening in the cold . . .

Bookcases, full of new Ace paperbacks, dry and safe. Lots of old children's books, historicals. *We Were There with Caesar's Legions*. Sat on my bed, that pale tan bedspread I preferred, sneezed at the dust. Sat. Patch of sunlight, sunlight pouring through the window, warm square on the brown carpet. My little student's desk, mug full of pencils and pens. My schoolbooks, homework on that last day, piled neatly in one corner. Bureau, full of my clothes.

Might not fit anymore. I'm a lot skinnier. A little bit taller . . .

I got up and went to the living room, opened the flue, started a fire, cooked the puppy for my supper. And read *Thuvia, Maid of Mars* by the light of our kerosene lamp. And kept thinking I really ought to check on Lucky, down in the basement, make sure he'd been fed, had enough water.

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And slept in my own bed.

Morning.

I ate some cold dog, looking out over the weedy ruin of my parents' carefully tended backyard, sunlight yellow on brown grass, patches of green starting to appear here and there, wondering what to do.

Home now. Don't leave. Safe here. Nonsense. In any event, the inventory wasn't reassuring. We'd cleaned the cupboards bare when we left, taking all the canned food that would fit in the car. There was some stuff in the basement, a few big jars of dried beans, some cans of beets, stuff I'd've gagged over a year ago. I found a big bowl and put some navy beans on to soak. Not much pressure. A trickle. Gravity feed from uphill pipes maybe. Well. Dog would serve in place of pork, maybe I could find an onion somewhere. And there were still spice jars upstairs.

Beautiful day outside. Another clear blue sky, more brilliant sunshine, sun climbing up the vivid shield of heaven, like an image from a movie, or a book. . . .

I could hardly believe my books were safe. Walking in the darkness, in the cold and snow, huddling in sewer pipes, freezing, I never thought I'd ever lay in a warm, dry room and read Barsoom stories again.

I loaded my rifle, five in the clip, nothing in the chamber, clicked the safety, and went for a walk, carefully locking the door behind me.

The paths along the creek were still intact, still clearly marked, beaten earth between walls of dry vegetation, reedy weeds that would soon come back to life. We always wondered what made them, what kept them clear. Kids? Dogs? Wild animals. Still here, and I still didn't know.

Stopped by the big dead tree, peering close. There. Line of little black ants emerging, headed out for their daily foraging trip. Like old friends. Larry and I used to come by here every so often and start thumping on the dry gray wood of the trunk, stirring them up. But they'd waited us out, after all, hadn't they?

I followed the creek down past Hilton Avenue, followed a path that led up the hill, away from the creek, deeper into the woods. This was the one we'd found last, after we got tired of walking back and forth along the creek between our houses and the Drug Fair by Route 1. Sitting in the fluorescent-lit store, reading comics we didn't want to buy, sitting at the fountain, loading our greasy french fries with masses of tart red ketchup. . . .

The path led uphill, following a line of rotting fence posts, a tangle of rusty barbed wire strands that disappeared under the leaf mold, emerged, vanished again. I followed it until I came to the crest of the hill.

Remember?

I remembered.

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Larry and I walking along in the woods, bright spring day shining above the trees, following this newfound path, wondering where it led. Can't go on forever. Sooner or later, we'd have to pop out of the woods, up by Our Lady of Angels Catholic church, or maybe at the foot of Botts Avenue. There was a new junior high school there, Fred M. Lynn, where we'd be going next year. . . .

This year!

I would already have completed my first year at the new school, if . . .

Remember coming to the top of the hill, stopping suddenly, surprised at the vista, Larry bumping into me, muffled exclamation of delight at the view.

We'd christened it Dorvo Valley, after some imaginary monsters that lived on our imaginary Venus.

Long, sloping hillside, bare of trees, dirt dug out in little craters, swathes of berry bushes, red berries whose names we never found out, growing in the tall brown grass, one lone tree in the middle of the valley, more woods beyond, the spire of the Catholic church visible above them, shining like polished brass in the morning sun.

"Look," Larry whispered. "The Temple of Venusia. . . ."

Now, there was a patched brown wall tent set up under that lone tree, the black remains of a campfire dead before its closed flap. It opened then and he came out, stood looking up at me, face expressionless, small caliber pistol in one hand.

Not quite like stray cats, but close, not knowing what to say, how to act. Larry said, "Well. What d'*you* want?" Like that. Like nothing bad had ever happened.

He put out folding chairs for us, a camp table, started a fire, got out a big frying pan while I sat and watched. Skinny. Maybe fifty pounds lighter than he'd been when I left, bones standing out under the skin of his face, fingers long and thin. And he had a big slab of salty bacon, a bucket of what looked like fresh hens' eggs, brown, from Rhode Island reds. . . .

There was, he said, nobody living in Woodbridge anymore. Nobody at all. And he'd found an abandoned farm south of town with chickens running loose, laying eggs all over the place, bacon hanging in a larder.

Stores with a few things left on the shelves, people's houses, all sorts of abandoned stuff. . . .

Looking at me over a plate of bacon and eggs, a mug of badly made coffee. "Where're you staying?"

"My parents' house."

Long look. "How are they?"

I shook my head.

A nod. "I went out to play one day, maybe six months after you left.

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When I came home my mom and dad were gone and the house was wrecked."

I ate, drank, realized I hadn't had food like this in so long the flavors were unfamiliar.

"What're you going to do?"

I shrugged. "Stay here. Um, in my house." My house. "I've got no place else to go."

Larry licked his plate, then stood, throwing it to one side, in a patch of weeds. Stood, stretched, then suddenly spun and looked at me. "Hey! Wait'll you see *this*. . . ." He went into the tent, rummaged noisily, came out with a long, straight-bladed sword, pointed it at me. "So, Alendar. You want to play Venus now?"

I sat and stared, for a long moment, sat back then, and started to laugh. And it was exactly what I wanted to do. Play Venus with a belly full of eggs and bacon, play Venus with my best friend, and give no more thought to dead people, to a life in which I ate puppy dogs for breakfast.

Venus, at least, our Venus, was still the same.

And yet . . . we played that game because, always, we had wanted the world to change.

So it went on like that. We played together, foraged, going through people's houses, talking, talking, slowly becoming ourselves again. Not saying anything about it. Nothing about parents. Nothing about the world, new or old, not what things had been, not what they were now. Just our world. Things we could find to do. And the ever-evolving portmanteau paradise of Venus. After a while, it did seem that it was Alendar and Raitearyón who lived on in the ruins of Marumsco Village, rather than Alan Burke and Larry Pernotto.

Summer had come back, beautiful and dry. Hot. Summer gone so long we'd almost forgotten what it could be like. Swimming down in Belmont Bay. Running wild in the woods. We looked and looked for a rowboat or a canoe, but couldn't find one.

And no one here but us. It seemed so odd that everyone had gone away. Impossible. Once, as I stood resting at the top of the steep hill beyond Forest Glen Avenue, a bullet smacked hard into the trees nearby, followed by the echo of a distant gunshot. I never saw anyone, never heard any voices, for they'd all gone away.

We moved into my parents' house together, setting him up in what had been their bedroom. He loved wallowing in their big double bed, snickering at the stains on the mattress as we changed their dusty old sheets.

Familiar. Familiar sights. I remembered having seen those stains before. Remembered listening to the soft sounds of my parents that I supposed led to their creation. Past. Gone. Forget it. For every memory of

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poor Lucky dead in the snow, there's another memory of someone else's puppy warm in your stomach. . . .

Then it was fall, then winter, and the snow came back, piling high in dark streets that never got plowed, Larry and I walking in the night, bundled up in new coats we found in a partly looted Sears. Sky full black overhead, flooded with hard, brilliant stars, Larry looking up, pointing out constellations to me, naming stars, pointing out Jupiter and Venus, even a red fleck he said was Mars.

Like the old days. Larry always memorizing things so he could show off, I supposed, stars, birds, wild flowers. . . .

In January, I shot a fat doe up on the eroded land where they'd just begun extending I-95 south from the terminus of Shirley Highway. Something I could do. A way to show off. Memory of myself at a carnival, propped just so, aiming at the wig-wagging target, squeeze-squeeze-squeeze . . . seven rounds, seven hits, taking a sturdy bamboo cane for my prize, looking around at a circle of astonished boys.

A mutter: "Fucking *Burke*? I don't believe it. . . ."

Then, to our relief, spring again. It was 1965 already, though it didn't seem to matter much. We seemed to be a little bigger, kept having to search people's houses for new clothes, having to go farther afield every month as houses were mined out, as mold and mildew slowly won their inevitable victories over cloth and leather.

And we were walking along the embankment, walking beside the woods, looking down on the cracked concrete pavement of I-95. This part, just south of Shirlington, had been finished for years. We'd been hunting, doing okay, a small dog, a couple of seagulls. . . . More birds now than there'd been in years, Larry insisting that if the quail came back they'd be *delicious*. . . . Seagulls, though, tasted liked shit. I seemed to remember them hanging around the dump. Seagoing pigeons, that's all.

And noise from the road. Unfamiliar noise, sending us back into the trees, crouching, rifles at ready, watching.

Grinding, like metal on metal on stone. They weren't going very fast. Three big green trucks full of men in dark green uniforms, metal helmets, rifles held casually, muzzles pointed at the bright blue sky. Big white stars on the cab doors of the trucks, vertical exhaust pipes puffing black diesel smoke. Going past us, very slowly, disappearing to the north, sounds fading.

We sat there then, in the woods, silent for a while. Those were the first people we'd seen in a year, the first either of us had seen since I'd come home in the snow.

Finally, Larry said, "I thought it would stay this way, you know?"

I nodded. Just the two of us, pretending we were alone in a world emptied of human beings, playing, for the rest of our lives, which, just now, sort of seemed like forever.

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I said, "Well. Things'll change again. Maybe they'll even change back. . . ." Marumsco Village full of children and cars and dogs, even though we'd eaten all the dogs ourselves, and cartoons on TV, teachers in school, bullies and comic books and friends. . . .

Larry whispered, "It can't change back. The world is smashed flat and . . ." he turned and looked at me, eyes narrow, mirroring pain, "Our parents are dead."

No. Things would never be what they had been, no matter how hard we wished. And I hadn't wished very hard. Wishing made me remember the Indiana snow, though the only image left now was a very small one, of a little ball of hair stomped flat on the road. I still remembered the sound he made when the man did that to him.

When it happened, it happened very suddenly, without warning, without giving us much time to think. It was winter again, the same winter we both began having to shave for real, first him then me, changing blades more and more often, glad there were plenty of razor blades, wrapped bright and shiny in immortal plastic, in the ruins of all the stores down by Route 1.

There was snow in the sky, though none had fallen that day, and a lot more snow on the ground, crusted old snow, snow that had melted and frozen several times. Seedy-looking snow, though it never got as bad as it had when there were people in the world. I was looking forward to a new storm. Fair white world. A world which, when the blue skies came back, would glisten in the sun.

I'd been out by myself, hunting locally, but no luck. The woods around Marumsco Village seemed played out, driving us very far afield, the game, I supposed, understanding that we were here, that we'd eat them if we could.

I was walking up Hill Court, the street that dead-ended against my backyard, smelling the familiar smell of impending snow, wishing it would start to fall soon, imagining the slow, downward drift of heavy, clotted flakes, when I heard voices.

No big deal. Voices. This is Marumsco Village. Ten thousand people live around here. You always hear voices.

And me, stopped dead in the street. Listening. Suddenly sweating inside my coat, feeling it trickle down my sides, itching. Making me shiver.

Images. Always snowy images. Always colored so badly wrong. I worked the bolt on my rifle, slowly, nervous, hoping the voices would cover that little metallic click-clink, started down low, working my way past the DeButts's green and white split-level, angling so I'd come up to the fence behind the woodpile. Woodpile right where my father built it, a bit smaller than it had been three years ago, though we tried to keep it replenished. Hauling wood in kids' wagons is hard work.

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There were four of them down in the backyard, standing in the flat spot where our plastic pool had been, standing under the dining room window. Broken window. Four bushy-bearded, sandy-haired men in ratty old clothes, torn up clothes, clothes far too light for the weather.

Something wrong with them? They don't know how to find new clothes?

Larry was over by the trellis that supported my mother's favorite rose bush, the wild-looking one by the backyard gate. Had his rifle, had it pointed at the men, the 30.06 that had belonged to his father, who never went hunting, just liked to keep guns around. Angry look on his face, too, stubborn.

And the men had funny accents, thick, adenoidal. Something I remembered from right around the time the bombs fell. One of them, a big, burly man with large, bare, red-knuckled hands, said, "Come on, boy. Put your gun down. We won't hurt you." Taking a step forward, right at the muzzle.

One of the other men laughed, a nasty little sound, and said, "Nah, not mooch . . ."

One of the other men said, "Come on, mate. Let's get this done. Me bleedin' arse is 'alf-froze . . ."

Larry standing still, his rifle steadfast, unwavering. Eyes big, though. Very big. Big enough I could see the whites . . .

Big enough . . .

I sighted in and put one through the man who'd said "mooch," the others spinning suddenly. Click-clink, aim, fire, this time at the man with the bleedin' arse . . .

WHACK. Something splintered the woodpile, bits stinging in my face. Larry's rifle made its familiar muffled *blaang*. Click-clink. Aim. Squeeze the trigger.

Classic, ringing silence.

Four men lying in the snow.

Larry on his knees, puking.

I stood, reeling, feeling so very odd. No time for this . . . I went down the hill, started checking them out. One through the chest, hole the size of a softball beside his left shoulderblade. One through the throat, blood staining the snow, just like that other blood, that other snow. Third one lying on his back, eyes open, little red hole high on his sternum.

The fourth was the ringleader, curled in a little ball, crying softly to himself. I kicked his gun out of reach, nudged him with my toe. Grunt of agony. Gut shot, Larry's rifle a faraway bang even now.

The man looked up at me, eyes bright with pain. I guess maybe that was terror too, Larry still retching in the background. The man said, "Oh. Oh, my God . . ."

Click-clink. Aim. Squeeze the trigger. Echoes fading away, bouncing around among all the little tract houses. Four men dead in the snow.

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Larry whispered, "Jesus Christ, Alan. Oh, Christ . . ."

I looked over at him and said, "Alendar. Alendar and Raitearyón."

A slow nod. All right. It's all right. We're heroes. Fantasy heroes are allowed to kill people. Registered in the same licensing office as James Bond. . . .

It took us hours to drag them over to the Marteaus' yard, hack into the frozen ground with picks, get them buried. At least we did that. At least. And I don't know where my parents are. Or Larry's parents. Or poor Lucky. Or even that little girl.

Clean bones, by now. . . .

What was it the poet said? "Clean bones gone."

Winter then, and spring. Spring of 1967, pickings around here beginning to grow sparse, the world refilling with people. More trucks on Route 1, common enough we got used to hearing them in the distance, motors rumbling as they shifted gears on the curves. Sometimes we'd go up on the hill beside Our Lady of Angels, what we'd long called the Temple of Venusia, and watch them go by.

And people back in Marumsco Village by ones and twos and little families, people wary of each other, no one we knew. An occasional car, prowling down the street, mean-eyed men and women staring at us. All right. We were used to carrying our guns.

I wondered where they were getting the gasoline. Nowhere nearby.

Then more people, and more. The world, indeed, changing back. Not to what it had been, but still, to something more familiar. I knew the old era had come to a close when the A&P opened back up, not the same manager, not the same bag boys, not the same cashiers, but the same canned goods, lining all the shelves. And I knew it was over for me the day I went in, wanting to shop, penniless, and applied for a job.

The man just looked me up and down, at the rifle tucked so casually under my arm, nodded, and put me to work. Fifty cents an hour, he said, and a bag of free groceries a week.

One Saturday afternoon in late May, the sun shining overhead, tangled lawns dotted with tall, stalky, wild-looking dandelions, Larry and I decided to go on into DC and see what was happening in the world. It would have been a long walk, twenty-two miles, but by then we'd fixed up our old bikes, my heavy red Schwinn, Larry's sleek black Italian racer. It'd take no more than an hour and a half, up newly patched Shirley Highway, past the Pentagon, across the 14th Street Bridge and there you were.

It'd only been a few weeks since the store'd started selling battery-powered transistor radios, but we already felt like we'd somehow been transported into the past. Music. Music and news. Steve Allen every Friday night.

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News hard to listen to, very strange news, news we'd missed over the past four years, world going on without us, as it had gone on without the presence of the many who'd died. I'd known permanent martial law was declared back in '63, but somehow missed the accession of Provisional President Robert MacNamara after that. Too wrapped up in my own misery, I guess. And, of course, then I was on that long, long walk. . . .

Missed the Collapse of Civilization. Just about everyone in Eurasia had, apparently, been killed. By bombs in the north, by famine in the south. Then trouble and more trouble. Deadly famine in Africa, revolution and conventional war in South America.

By 1964, they said, the population of the world, from a peak of nearly two-and-a-half billion, had fallen to less than six hundred million. That many people dead, they said, in eighteen months.

After which, the world held four surviving nation-states, America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. Holding off an avalanche of refugees by force of arms.

They say, in the end, they had to use nuclear weapons on Indonesia to keep the beggars at bay. And they had to evacuate the surviving population of Britain, all ten million of them, put them ashore empty-handed on the coast of South Carolina. Which, I suppose, explains where the Mooch Man and the Bleedin' Arse came from. The grass over their graves, visible from my bedroom window, seemed particularly rich and green.

And now? MacNamara still holding on, of course, still running the show, giving speeches in his dry, flat voice, his face appearing in the thin newspapers of 1967, still wearing those old-fashioned glasses, glasses I remembered seeing on TV the day before the world came to an end.

Denouncing his opponents. Because the Senate had reconvened, secretly, in Montpelier, Vermont, independent of the martial law government, senators from thirty states who would, they said, reestablish the civil government under the Constitution. Would, they said, hold the 1968 Presidential Election on schedule. . . .

Hard to imagine that. We also heard, from a news report on WJZ-FM, staticky words read by good, old Frank McGee, that the Democratic Party was talking about holding a special convention, about to select the men they'd run for president next year. Rumor was it would be former Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and someone called John Kenneth Galbraith. I never heard of him. Apparently, he'd been Ambassador to India during the war, and had somehow made his way home. It seemed very weird to have this stuff back, and the soldiers were everywhere.

It was a bright, sunny day when we rode across the Fourteenth Street Bridge, thin columns of blue smoke rising from the cityscape ahead of us as we rolled past the round, colonaded Jefferson Memorial, Capitol dome glistening white, Washington Monument towering just the way it always had.

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For some reason, I kept imagining it had fallen, imagining, maybe, that really great scene from *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers,* where the saucer hits the base of the Monument and explodes, Monument toppling, falling in one piece to the ground like some vast white tree, people fleeing across the grassy hillside like colored-dot ants, being crushed as it fell upon them. Even when I was a little kid I knew the Monument was made from millions of stone blocks, would shatter as it fell. Still, the image was there.

Loud, throbbing roar from out over the tidal Basin. We sat on our bikes by the side of the road, looking out past the bright, pink and white cherry blossom trees, watching as a C-130 struggled up from National Airport, engines shrill as it circled over the city, then turned southward. A lot of people dead down south. A lot of cities just ruins around radioactive holes in the ground. *Alas, Babylon?* Maybe they're making it down in Timucuan County. Maybe Fort Repose is still there.

Larry, watching the plane, shading his eyes with his hand, squinting, said, "I almost don't remember what it's like to ride on a plane anymore. . . ."

I'd never been for a plane trip, my parents talking about how, maybe *this* Christmas, we'd fly up to Boston rather than drive. Fly up, maybe, on one of those noisy Lockheed Electra turbo-props, or a Vickers Viscount. Not that many 707s on the short-haul routes up the east coast. Not yet.

The Mall between the Capitol Building and the Washington Monument was dusty now, grass all gone, but still the same, nonetheless, golden dome over the Natural History museum still glistening in the sun, red brick castle of the little Air and Space museum just the way I remembered it. I could hardly wait to see the stuffed elephant again, to stand looking up at the hanging model of a blue whale, the dugong's skeleton that used to scare my mom. Or go over behind the castle and see that wrinkle-skinned old V-2, or a Jupiter-C just like the one that put Explorer 1 in orbit. . . .

The dusty Mall was full of tents, people walking among the tall, thick old trees, mostly military people in a variety of green, brown, and blue uniforms, Navy white here and there. A lot of men in gray business suits just like the one my dad used to wear to work.

Larry said, "What's the matter?"

I wiped my eyes with the tail of my shirt, and said, "Nothing. I smell barbecue. . . ."

They were having a cook-out, one pudgy young soldier in corporal's stripes told us, to celebrate the return of the U.S. Government to its traditional capital in Washington, D.C. Here. You boys want some hot-dogs? After lunch, he said, President MacNamara would come by to give a speech. . . .

And we found him, just like that, not long after the president gave his rather dull speech about how necessary it was to continue Martial Law,

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so the country could continue getting back on its feet, so we could lead the world on the long road to recovery.

We stood there for a long time, watching him flip greasy hamburgers on a smoking grill, chattering away with some short, stocky blond girl, both of them dressed in slightly threadbare Marine fatigues. Finally he looked up, maybe feeling our eyes on him, maybe just noticing us standing there. Puzzled look. Long, silent stare, then, "Oh, *fuck*. Alan? Larry?"

I was a little surprised at the way he rushed over and hugged me, at the bright, alien look in his eye, his little friend standing in the background, arms folded, grinning. And Neal Dixon, pounding me on the back, grabbing Larry by the shoulders and shaking him, laughing. "Jesus Christ, I figured I'd never see you guys again. . . ."

I remembered watching him run away, light coming through the trees, tall, ugly columns of smoking boiling up in the north. Four-and-a-half years ago, already. I said, "How've you been?"

Grin fading, serious look flooding his eyes. "Okay, you?"

I shrugged, glanced at Larry. "Um. How's your brother? Your mom and dad."

A hooded look. Hurt look. He said, "We live in an old brownstone over in Georgetown. Pretty neat. You'll have to come by and . . ." A sudden silence, then, "My, uh . . . they nuked Guantanamo. No survivors. Yours?"

When I didn't answer, he turned and looked at Larry, who said, "I don't know. They're just . . . gone, I guess."

"Alan?"

I wanted to tell him about Indiana, about the red snow and Lucky and the way my mom's face looked while she was being raped, but I couldn't. "Dead."

He nodded, turned back toward the grill, started pushing burgers and dogs around. "This is my friend Jeannie. Her father's a colonel." Neal's father had been a major, maybe would've been a general by now. . . . He said, "We go to the base school they've set up over by Lafayette Park. We're in the eleventh grade."

A sudden, sharp shock. We'd all be graduating from high school in another year, if . . .

Neal said, "You guys still hungry? Plenty of burgers left. Jesus, Larry, I never imagined you could get so *skinny*. . . ."

By the spring of 1968, Marumsco Village, all of Woodbridge really, seemed almost back to normal. Streets full of people, kids playing in the woods again, even people we knew reappearing. The Marteaus came back to rebuild the ruined house where we'd buried Mooch Man and Bleedin' Arse, their skinny daughter grown to become a rather attractive teenager. Son nowhere to be seen though, just the faded memory of the big boy who'd led me down into a dark basement one long-ago summer

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day. They asked after my parents, I asked after the son, and we all shook our heads together. Nothing.

I was surprised to find Marumsco Elementary School open again, to hear that Mr. Kildea was still its principal. Apparently, he'd crusaded to get it back open, had searched the entire country for his surviving teachers. When I went by, just for old-time's sake, Miss Johnson was in her old classroom, looking just the same, smiling, remembering me well enough. And telling me her name was indeed Mrs. Pugh now, cheeks dimpling as she smiled. "I remember how funny you thought that was, Alan. . . ."

I felt like I was under a cloud as I walked back down Greenacre Drive toward Larry's parents' house, though the sky was a bright, featureless blue overhead, the trees fuzzed with new yellow-green buds, the birds of spring singing in the forest all around me.

Think about it. A few years at Fred M. Lynn. Then what? Garfield High School? I remembered my parents talking about an upcoming bond-issue vote, speculating about whether it was worthwhile to build a brand new high school for the teenagers of Marumsco Village and the other developments around Woodbridge.

A couple of months more, and I would've been standing someplace in a cap and gown, accepting my piece of paper, parents beaming from the grandstand, shaking some principal's hand. College, maybe. What had I wanted to be? A paleontologist. I'd always pictured myself wandering some desert wasteland. Montana. Outer Mongolia. I'd wanted to be Roy Chapman Andrews.

Now? Nothing. No future. Nothing but the past.

The world had changed all right. Changed into the horrific adventure I always dreamed about when I was a kid. Giant meteor comes down and wipes away the constraints of Civilization, and Alan Burke, Burke the Jerk, becomes Ålendar Vexh-nem, son of Venusia, hero. But the world came back, and all the intervening five years did was take away what little I had. Adventure gone, and, with it, that old future I'd once regarded as a consolation prize.

So. What now, A&P stockboy with a seventh-grade education? You're back in Marumsco Village again, with nowhere to hide, no place to run. And outside of America, the rest of the world is gone. They won't be needing many paleontologists now.

Larry was waiting for me in front of 8 Greenacre Drive, toolkits opened on the lawn, next to the four new tires we'd scavenged, hood of the '61 beetle already open, peering in at that strange-looking air-cooled engine. He looked up at me, frowning, "You get it?"

I held up the *Chilton's* I'd found in the old public library, open for business again, so I'd had to sign for a card where, only a year ago, I'd've just taken the book I wanted.

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Looking at the engine, Larry said, "I remember working on this with my dad, you know? I feel like his ghost is in here somewhere."

I nodded. When we'd cleaned out the basement of 103 Staggs Court, so we could set up our little workshop, we'd swept up a fair amount of dusty black dog hair. Hair shed by Lucky, living in the basement because my mother didn't want him dirtying up our pretty new carpets. That felt like a ghost, too.

July. Nighttime. Electric light in Marumsco Village for the first time in six years. Streetlights lighting up the streets, washing all but the brightest stars from the sky, cars moving around in the semi-darkness. Strange to flip switches left motionless for a half-decade, strange to see the bulbs light right up. Strange to see the resistance elements on the old white kitchen range glow sullen orange. Strange to hear the refrigerator's compressor humming softly, making ice again after a long, faithful wait. Strange to lie in my little bed, reading *The Chessmen of Mars* for the fiftieth time, reaching up when I started yawning and dropping the book on my face, pulling the chain of the old poodle-base black ceramic lamp, closing my eyes on darkness. . . .

And standing in front of the old magenta Magnavox, hesitating, then turning the flat knob to "on." Crackle of static electricity from somewhere inside, the faint smell of burning dust. Larry, skeptical, just waiting, then there was a soft whisper from the speakers, the screen lighting up on familiar, grainy gray static.

Larry said, "Nothing on Channel 5, I guess. . . ."

I turned the dial, marveling at that familiar old thud as the multilayer switch inside changed position. Nothing. More nothing. All the way to 13, then the white dot where we could install a UHF converter if we wanted, and beyond. Channel 4. WTOP-TV transmitting from the nation's capitol. A talking-head newsman with very sleek, smooth black hair, placard on the desk that said "Neil Boggs."

I glanced at Larry. Nothing. Motionless. Mesmerized, watching the man's lips move, listening to his voice. Finally, he whispered, "Maybe we can fix my parents' old color set."

I said, "I wonder what's on tonight? I heard Steve Allen has a new show. . . ."

The night of the Democratic Convention, we talked Emily Jensen and Karen Mediash into coming over to watch on our set. Not many TV's had survived the intervening years, not many sets as tough as the old metal box my parents had bought in 1954, newer sets, more sophisticated technology much more fragile. I read something in the *Post* one day about how all those old-style tubes were immune to something called EMP. And new TV's cost a year's salary in the new economy.

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Getting the old VW back on the road made us mobile, injected us into the rather changed society of our surviving peers, the lost generation of teenagers for whom the world had come to an end just shy of Thanksgiving in 1962. Larry noticed Emily coming into the A&P, remembered her from the old days, still a pretty, chubby blond, still recognizable as the same sunny-faced girl we knew in school. Surprised us both when he struck up a conversation with her after their third or fourth encounter.

Turned out she was living with her dad, though her mother and brother had died in a flu epidemic that swept the Midwest in 1966. And they had with them Karen, her little brother Buddy, and Karen's mom. Emily seemed reluctant to talk about that, but I remembered Karen Mediash as a thin, rather swarthy girl who'd been Emily's shadow, the two of them playing girls' sports together, constant companions. . . .

It seemed reasonable, when Larry started going out with Emily, that the two of us would sort of tag along, going to the movies together now that Marumsco Theatre was open again, featuring a dollar show every Saturday night, the two of them walking on ahead, holding hands, the two of us walking behind, not talking much.

It was like that when we sat down after dinner, the two girls praising the culinary skills we'd accumulated during five years on our own, neither of them imagining the splendid dishes I'd once learned to make out of leftover roast puppy. Larry and Emily somehow jamming themselves into my father's favorite old red chair, arms around each other, Karen and I sitting on the same segment of my mother's blue-nylon sectional sofa, sitting next to each other, only a few inches apart, but careful not to bump into each other.

On the TV, DNC chairman Abbie Hoffman was giving a pretty little speech, square, strong young face very handsome under a mass of short, dense curly black hair, telling us about the Nixon/Goldwater plan to resurrect the Republican Party, run *against* Kennedy and Galbraith in the fall. This would, he said, wreak havoc with the Democrats' plan to unseat President MacNamara, now officially running as an Independent, once it became clear he could not avoid the contest. They should, Hoffman told us, be supporting the Democratic ticket. Politics as usual can come back once we've got the Constitution restored.

Then Barry Goldwater himself came on, representing Richard Nixon, who was on a good-will tour of Canada right now, and explained how the mess the world was in was the Democrats' fault, that they didn't *deserve* a second chance. Let Kennedy/Galbraith stand down and support Nixon/Goldwater for the presidency. . . .

We watched, Karen and I, and tried to ignore Larry and Emily, squirming away in their chair. During an entertainment interlude, some skinny Brit named John Lennon sat at a piano, singing solo in a

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high, rough voice, a haunting melody called "Imagine." Imagine, he asked us, what the world would be like today, if none of this had ever happened . . .

Some time before Bobby Kennedy came on to give his acceptance speech, Larry and Emily got up out of the chair, embraced and kissed, and I watched as Larry took her by the hand and led her down the long hallway to my parents' old bedroom. They shut the door and I glanced at Karen. She was staring fixedly at the TV.

Later, while we listened to the speech, she let me hold her hand, and we pretended we didn't hear the noises coming through the bedroom door. My parents, I remember, had been much quieter.

July 20, 1969.

One week, a carnival came rolling up Route 1 and set itself up on the broad, sloping parking lot of Marumsco Plaza, booths and tents erected like magic, burly men cursing as they jacked the little Ferris wheel level, horses for stunts and pony rides for kids and even a skinny, shaky-looking elephant that just stood there, chained to the bumper of a heavy truck. I liked the elephant, which had big, watery, intelligent-looking brown eyes.

The first night it was open, the four of us went over together, riding the rides, getting nauseous on chili dogs and cotton candy, Larry getting a mess of taffy-apple gunk stuck in his scruffy little beard. Emily laughing as she tried to pull it out, getting clumps of curly hair more than anything else.

The two of them, happy together, wrapped up in each other and some relaxing dream of a peaceful future. I could see the envy in Karen's eyes.

After a while, Karen and I got tired of the rides and shows, went walking away from the lights and the parking lot, walking hand in hand up the big, bald hill behind the shopping center, where you could look out over the whole wide sprawl of Marumsco Village. Still not so many lights out there. Plenty of people now, but only one house in ten was inhabited, the rest slowly rotting away, caving in, yards grown up around them with weeds and saplings and dry brown grass.

We sat on the hilltop, arms around each other, and kissed for a while, hands wandering a bit, stopped and looked up at a vast, cloudless black sky spangled with hard, bright stars, sat watching, while a fat, brilliant white Moon slid down the western sky.

I lay with my head in Karen's lap and remembered. Remembered the past. All of it lost. There'd been a big segment on this evening's news about the ERTS-1 satellite that'd just been put up in Low Earth Orbit, the first non-military satellite to go up since before the war. Sharp, crisp color pictures, taken from outer space. The pictures of Europe and Asia were a revelation. You'd think the forests would be growing back already,

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but they're not. Siberia's a wilderness of eroding brown mud, everywhere it's not black from burning.

Strange, oblique views of ruined cities, cities blown flat, cities burned away to nothing. There are eighteen large, water-filled craters where Moscow used to be. Eighteen. Did we really need that many? There aren't even ruins there now. Just big holes in the ground, surrounded by bare, rain-gullied dirt.

They say the fighting in Europe went on for almost a month, refugees from the east flooding westward all the way to the sea, killing the survivors, then dying themselves. Fighting and fighting, until all the bullets were gone.

By comparison, my lost years were a vacation in Paradise.

Karen leaned down and kissed me again, gently, on the brow, and in a remote, wistful voice, said, "Larry and Emily seem so happy now. . . ."

It'd been a nice wedding, held under the big weeping willow tree my father'd planted in the spring of 1958. Larry handsome in a tuxedo we found in someone's decaying house, Emily radiant in her mother's wedding dress. And a nice enough reception to follow. Me, Karen and her relatives, Emily's father, Jeannie and Neal and his mother and brother. A few leftover old friends who'd turned up again at last. . . .

I gave them 103 Staggs Court for a wedding present and moved my stuff over to 8 Greenacre Drive, which we'd begun fixing up. Only temporary though. . . .

Karen said, "We could be happy, too. If you wouldn't . . ."

Happy. Maybe so. We'd slept together a few times, when I'd been insistent, jealous of Larry, during one or another of Karen's more unguarded moments, maybe when she was jealous as well. It seemed all right, but . . . not, somehow, life's foundation. Not anymore.

And, *If you wouldn't . . .*

Image of Sargent Shriver, President Kennedy's brother-in-law, on TV, telling us about the new Peace Corps, revival of that other president's dream, of how American young people would go overseas now, to Europe and Japan, South America and India and Africa. Of how, together, we would rebuild the world.

Maybe it would be better than playing policeman with the army. Or building new bridges with the Job Corps. Maybe not. But it would certainly be better than working in the A&P in Marumsco Village, playing house with Karen for the rest of my life. Or maybe not. No way for me to know.

No reason for me to know.

Karen said, "We could be happy. It'd be like having our old lives back, sort of. . . ." Very far away now, maybe remembering those old days, plastic hallways and plastic friends and teachers and toys and cartoons on TV.

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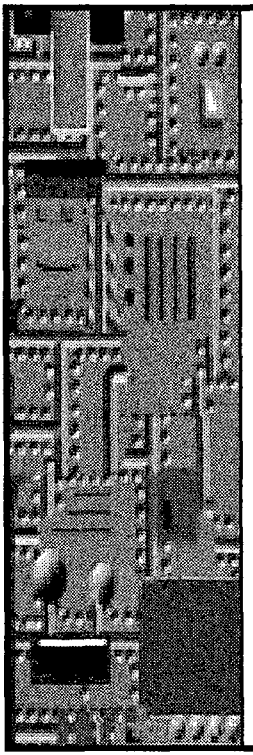
I said, "Maybe I don't want my old life back. I saw my father killed. I watched my mother being raped, and ran away to save myself. I strangled puppy dogs and ate them for supper. I shot four men to death one day. I saw the whole world die." Momentary silence, Karen sitting very still, one hand on my brow, eyes glistening in the moonlight. Finally, I said, "I don't like working in the A&P for fifty cents an hour. And I don't want to live with ghosts anymore."

Nothing else to say.

So I lay there in the darkness with my head in Karen's lap, looking up at a black and starry sky, carnival lights and noises playing out their little comic drama on the hard pavement below, looking up at the shadowy, crater-marked plains of the Moon, and wondered where we might be, right now, had none of it ever happened. ●



THE ROBOTS' *WASTELAND*

We are the Hollow Men Eliot never dreamed
would come. His generation numb with want
of will, wandering a war wasted world or left
with horrors seen too often trench on trench
to feel again. While we
work indifferent among wonders every day,

walk the seafloor where he never dreamed to go,
sit calmly in the furnace while the flames
leap and snap, without effect, at us,
stand on the glacier drilling day on day
in cold enough to make the eyeballs freeze
while the aurora wrinkles overhead

more numb, among miracles like these,
than any human with capacity to feel,
however much depression dimmed,
however much denied,
can ever imagine.

We, dead poet, are the Hollow Men.

—William John Watkins

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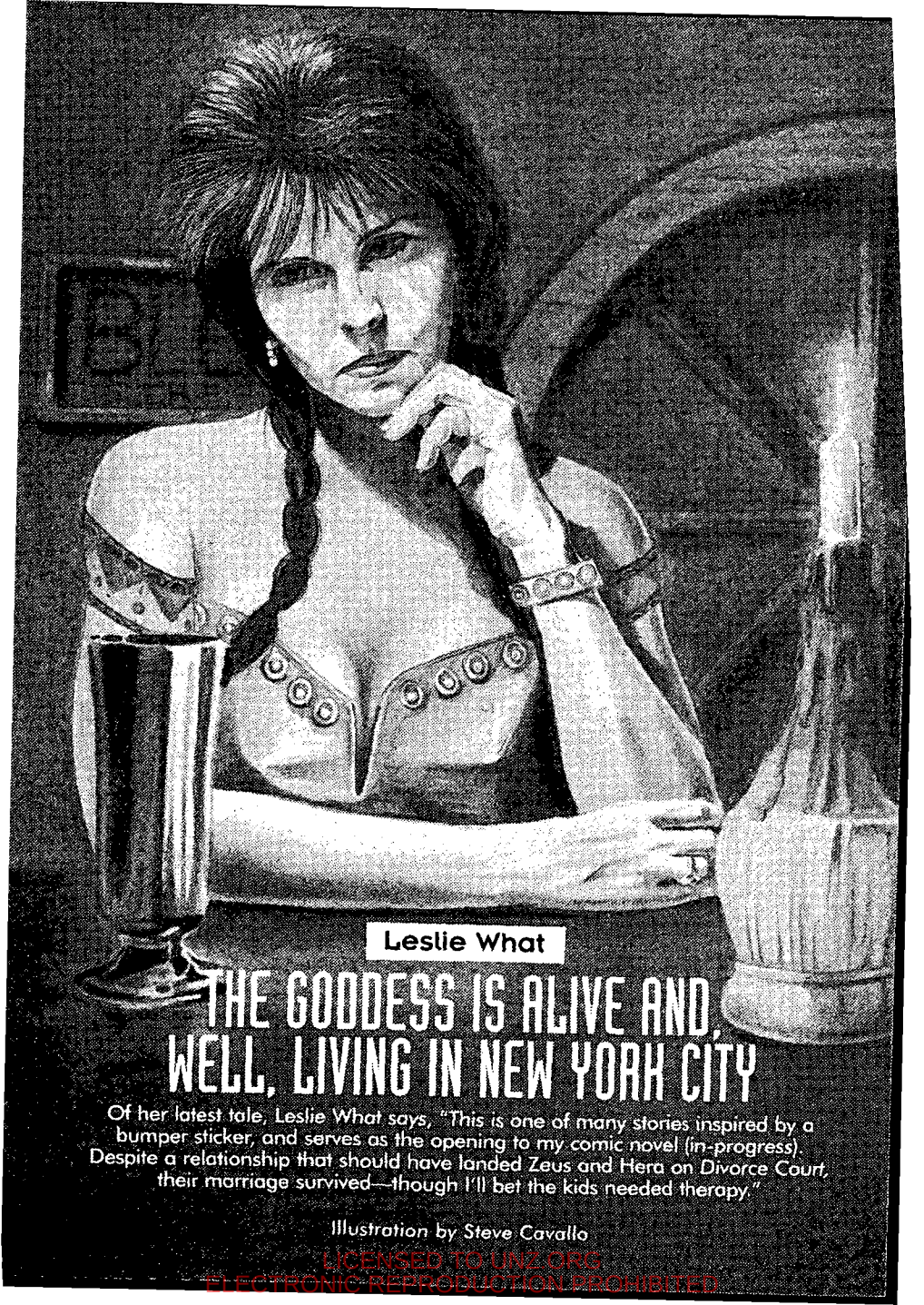

Leslie What

THE GODDESS IS ALIVE AND, WELL, LIVING IN NEW YORK CITY

Of her latest tale, Leslie What says, "This is one of many stories inspired by a bumper sticker, and serves as the opening to my comic novel (in-progress). Despite a relationship that should have landed Zeus and Hera on *Divorce Court*, their marriage survived—though I'll bet the kids needed therapy."

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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Hera arrived at the bar a little early, intending to spy on her husband. She knew full well that Zeus would come early as well to pick up a girl. She sat at a resin-coated table along the back wall, positioning her chair to face the door. The table was really just a wooden spool that had once held wire cable, but in the modern world, things were seldom what they seemed.

As if on cue, Zeus sauntered into the bar, his snug beige T-shirt bearing the legend "I'm so Virile I could Knock up a Rock." He'd dressed as a beefy version of himself with a six-thousand-year face-lift. His biceps were tanned and his now golden hair flowed softly over his shoulders. His faded black jeans fit snugly enough that Hera could make out the bulge of well-defined thighs. Not bad for someone who'd never believed in working out.

"By Jove!" said Hera, loud enough to irritate him. Either Zeus did not notice her in the dim light, or else he purposefully ignored her—a sobering thought, considering the effort she'd put into her disguise. She'd stood before her mirror for more than an hour that morning, agonizing over what to wear. Finally, she'd decided on something silver to highlight her dark color. She'd pictured a medieval knight until she saw it clearly in her mind, then fashioned a suit of plate armor, modified with Velcro closures that allowed her to undress without the assistance of slaves. She'd looped her black braids around her shoulder like infantry ropes. As far as *she* was concerned, she looked stunning.

It had been almost four years since she'd last seen Zeus. Evidently, he'd waxed nostalgic during the closing ceremonies of the '94 Olympic Games. A message had flashed across her television screen, "MGG (Married Greek god), tests negative, seeks goddess to revive fun and games," followed by a 900 phone number.

She'd called immediately. "By Jove!" she'd said when he'd answered the phone. "It *is* you!"

"Watching Nancy and Tonya made me think of *us*," he'd said. He'd cleared his throat, then cleared it again. "Listen, Hera, there's something I have to ask you. . . ." They'd arranged to meet at Zeus' favorite bar in the Village.

The prospect of seeing him now made her frantic. Sneaking another glance toward the door, Hera noticed a perky blonde thing—who looked young enough to have been their great-great-great-to-the-hundredth granddaughter—cozy over to a high stool at the bar. The girl wore cowboy boots and a matching hat, a sequined Spandex crop-top, and white leather shorts. Her big brown eyes held an innocent, stupid look that made Hera picture her as the cow she would become, should Zeus pursue what he'd surely consider a harmless flirtation.

True to form, Zeus approached the blonde. Hera leaned to the side, straining to hear their conversation.

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"My name's Bo," she heard Zeus say. "What's your sign? No, let me guess." He held the girl's small hand to examine the palm and stroked along the creases with his index finger. He fiddled with an opal ring on her left hand, as if to satisfy himself that she was single. He had some nerve, Hera thought. How *dare* he pick up a girl on the very same night he'd arranged to meet Hera! *Some* things never changed.

Zeus licked his lips, "Do you believe in. . . ."

"Coincidence?" the girl finished. She giggled. "Only when all else fails, I guess. I'm Fawn," she said. Her voice was artificially high and breathy.

"Brazen hussy," Hera grumbled. Her armor clinked as she crossed her legs, and she winced, her thighs chafed raw from the metal leggings. Suddenly, she understood why mortals valued pantyhose.

The bar was dark and smoky, with an incredibly efficient heating system and no open windows. Coupled with the poor ventilation in her armor, Hera was sweating a river. She pounded her empty cocktail glass on the table, keeping time with a singer who bleated rockabilly music from the stage. Dust motes, glowing in the spotlight's shadow, wafted up from the dance floor, where several couples gyrated with abandon. Women spilled from their clothes, practically bubbling over their necklines like sugar-fed yeast.

Civilization had truly died with the creation of America, and here was the *proof*. It wasn't like the old days, when only young boys strutted around naked. Hera had just started to wonder if she hadn't dressed a bit too formally when an old woman pushing a shopping cart stumbled through the door and passed out. That gave Hera a grand idea. She turned herself into a pygmy bag-lady. Beneath her threadbare beige cloth coat she fashioned a leopardskin G-string. She accessorized with animal hides, bones, and teeth, and piled her hair above her head. Simple, but elegant. Just that little bit of magic left her feeling fatigued, and Hera realized with a start that she'd reached middle age and was helpless to prevent what she sensed was about to happen between Zeus and that girl.

She decided to make him jealous instead, and searched the crowd for an expendable man to parade around in front of Zeus until he exploded and turned the guy into a parking meter or a stop sign. Someone like Jimmy Hoffa, or that presidential candidate from a few years back, John Anderson, who no one would miss if they were never heard from again.

Not one man in the entire bar looked interesting enough to bother with, and Hera sighed, fatigued with the mortal world. She and Zeus were the last gods left, the others having long ago perished from boredom.

A waitress stopped to light a candle in a holder that had been reincarnated from an empty Italian wine bottle, years worth of multicolored candle wax drips clotting down the sides. When the waitress wasn't looking, Hera pilfered a banana daiquiri from her tray. She emptied the glass into her mouth, turning it upside down with one dark wrinkled hand while

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tapping against the bottom with the other. She sucked on the toothpick part of the parasol to extract the very last drop of sweetened rum. Unfortunately, when she pulled the toothpick from her mouth, tiny splinters broke off and embedded in her tongue, stinging her like nettles. "Kopros!" she said, Old Greek for shit.

"Yo! Ganymede!" she called to the waitress. "Could we get a refill on the nectar?" Her voice sounded teeny as a mosquito fart. No one paid her the slightest attention. She stomped a bare foot on the wooden floor and was stabbed by her warthog-teeth anklet. If only she could hear herself think, she knew she could come up with another plan, but just then, the band began a deafening rendition of "Feelings." Fawn's breathy voice floated through the air to catch her attention. "So tell me," Fawn said to Zeus. "What's a big guy like you do when you're not in here doing this?"

He laughed, slapping his thigh. "Summers I work as a lifeguard at Camp Olympus, in the Catskills," Zeus said. He snapped his fingers and a waitress approached, carrying a dark green bottle, the house Chardonnay. She gave Zeus the cork to sniff. "Enchanting," he said, and palmed the cork, then fiddled with his hands long enough to bring forth a bouquet of daisies. "What I'd really like to be is an actor." He offered the flowers to Fawn.

"Oh wow! Is that right? Well, wouldn't everyone?"

"It beats being a god, that's for sure."

"I know what you mean. I worked for a god, once," Fawn said. She winked. "Military man."

Zeus grinned and poured two glasses of what was now sparkling wine. Hera heard it bubble from her table. Typical. He'd bought the cheapest white wine on the menu and turned it into champagne. The sneaky old Greek!

"To us," Zeus said. Fawn giggled.

Hera groaned and ran her tongue around the inside rim of her glass. She looked around the smoky room for help, but everyone seemed to be preoccupied living in their own personal drama. A copper-haired floozy wearing a tuxedo jacket and boxer shorts went from table to table, trying to talk the men into buying her a drink. A bearded man in a clown suit, obviously in the throes of a mid-life crisis, cased the joint, looking for companionship. A young nurse sat alone at a booth, picking wax from her candle to re-melt over the flame. How could she compete with all of that?

Hera threw her glass to the floor to see who would care. Not unsurprisingly, no one did, but it was a cheap thrill, one that she'd remember for at least another five minutes. The waitress had made herself scarce, perhaps suspecting that the goddess wasn't a big tipper. This was true, Hera thought, though tipping seemed a bit much to ask. In the old days, people had *prayed* for their chance to serve Hera! But those days had passed, and Hera knew it. So she did what any self-respecting leftover

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goddess would do in such a situation: climbed atop the table and waved her short arms in circles around her pygmy head. No one seemed to notice that, either.

She was kopros out of luck. The only way she could make her paltry drink last was to make herself smaller. Hera concentrated and rematerialized into a hair louse, determined to cling tightly onto her husband's scalp and eavesdrop more efficiently.

It turned out to be a really stupid idea. At that size, her blood alcohol hovered above ninety percent. When she came to, Hera found that not only was she looped, she was lodged inside a crevice in the table-top. A male louse was hopping her way, a bit too eagerly to be considered polite. The fog lining in her eyes slowly dissipated, and she perked up enough to zap the louse into a transit cop, then sent him outside to prowl the streets with New York's Finest.

She zapped a wristwatch over her left front leg and groaned as its second hand inched forward. With a start, Hera realized that she'd been unconscious nearly fifteen minutes, during which time she'd likely consummated a relationship with one or more blood-sucking mini-mites. Just Hera's luck to have been a minor fertility goddess in what seemed like a former life. All bets were off—she'd probably get pregnant.

She sobered up quickly. The thought of a pregnancy at this stage of life left her feeling sick to her stomach, made worse by visualizing the possible combinations of offspring. There wasn't a thing to do about it, now. And deep down, it wasn't the lice she was angry with, anyway. She'd mated with her share of insects before—hadn't *every*one? How about that time she'd given birth to those wingy things that were later christened killer bees?

Hera had to admit that Zeus was the one she wanted to get even with. But Zeus was somewhat harder to confront than a few wingless parasites. She wondered what her analyst would say about the turn of events. Maybe the pregnancy wasn't so accidental, after all. Of course, Zeus would ask her to hop into the conjugal cloud without blinking an eye. To someone like him, fidelity was a four-letter word. Well, he'd have a surprise. Zeus may have been the king of the gods, but Hera was not so eager to trust someone who had dunked more hoops than Wilt Chamberlain. Even with a Trojan between them.

"Would you like a ride in my chariot?" she heard Zeus say. He was utterly without shame.

Poor Fawn probably thought he was kidding, and said, "Sure. Where to?"

"Slut!" Hera shouted, but she was too small to be heard by anything larger than a one-celled organism. She hopped from the crevice to the tabletop for a look around. By this time, Zeus and his doe-eyed date had vanished from sight.

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A drunk bumped against her table and Hera lost her footing and fell on her back. Above, the ceiling had been painted with glow-in-the-dark stars, which trailed spider webs that were lit by stage-light, looking like galaxies. Hera regained her composure, and, when no one was looking, turned herself into a middle-aged waitress with a skirt that rode the underside of her butt like a senator's hands. She waltzed up to the bartender. "Three strawberry daiquiris, hold the parasols," she said. She could hardly control herself until he'd blended the ice. The second the bartender turned his back, and Hera slurped the drinks down, one after the other. Her throat froze up and she couldn't talk, or she would have ordered another round. Just as well. If Zeus walked in and saw her drunk, he'd think she was desperate. She *was* desperate, but not desperate enough to let Zeus *know* it. She couldn't admit how much she wanted things to work out this time.

Hera left the empties on the counter and wobbled her way up close to the stage, where she turned herself into the drummer, then stuck the drummer's consciousness inside his drumsticks. She joined the band, letting the drumsticks play by themselves. Percussion was the sound of modern angst. Too bad the lyre was out of fashion. Its music was calming, introspective. She never heard its melodic strains anymore except for when "1000 Strings" played in elevators.

A young girl, watching intently, caught Hera's attention with a wink. Hera realized that the girl was flirting with her, or at least with the rockstar body she was using. It seemed a pathetic gesture, given the circumstances.

That reminded her of something. The last young man she'd had—and by young, *she'd* meant forty—had told Hera that when he was young—and by young, *he'd* meant sixteen—every boy had wanted to be in a rock band and every girl had wanted to sleep with someone in a rock band. When Hera was young, and by *that* she meant before her first few centuries, every human either wanted to become a god, or else sleep with one. Seemed some things never changed.

One hour later, Zeus walked in, smiling sheepishly. He always came back, eventually. Maybe this time, he'd even stick around. Zeus sat at Hera's old table to watch the band; he tapped his foot and shrugged his shoulders in time to the music. He frowned, evidently sensing that this was where she'd separated the nits from the boys. Hera couldn't bear to face him yet, and threw the spots against his face to keep him from seeing her. That was when she noticed the heart-shaped hickey Fawn had sucked on his neck.

Tacky, tacky! Something in her snapped. From the corner of her eye, she caught Zeus smiling. He tilted his head her way, and she realized that he'd seen through her disguise and was onto her. His hickey raised into purple letters that said, "Help me."

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She felt her cheeks burn; the stage beneath her smoked as her rage let loose. The air thickened with yellow steam. Hera's eyes began watering; she dropped the drumsticks and pulled away from the drummer. In a few moments, she'd dissolved completely into vapor. She misted across the stage. The drummer's body slumped to the floor and the band stopped mid-song to attend to him. "Where am I?" she heard the drummer ask when his consciousness transferred back inside his head.

Hera landed in an empty chair beside Zeus, with her back—as it were—to the band. She heard someone ask, "Is he all right?" answered by, "I'll take a look at him. Trust me, I'm a doctor." Hera waited a few minutes, and then figured it was safe to transform. She turned herself into herself.

Zeus frowned, no doubt expecting someone younger. "Long time no see," he said. "How've you been?"

"Not too bad," Hera said. She hurriedly stuck a few king snakes through her hair to contrast with the color, and lowered the bodice of her chiton to nipple level. She made her legs tan, and polished the toenails with gold to match her sandals. "And you?" she asked. This seemed a pointless conversation, yet she did not want things to get too pointed, yet. She opened her clutch and removed a pearl-shell compact to powder her nose.

Zeus started it. "Stay away from that girl, Hera," he said, shaking his finger in front of her face. "I want your word you won't turn her into some furry animal or something."

Hera drew on lipstick and smacked her lips together. She raised an eyebrow. "I really don't know what you mean," she said.

"Look, I've lost more dates to your petty jealousies than I care to remember. And for what? You know I love you more than I'll ever love her," Zeus said, lowering his glance. His lips quivered with humility; he was really adept at pumping out the charm.

"Oh?" Hera said, having heard this before. "Is that a fact?"

"Come on. I think about you all the *time*," he said. "You want to have a go at it again? Move in with me? I have an incredible pied-à-terre in the heart of the Village. Three hundred a month. Rent controlled."

"You'll tell your landlord that I'm your wife," Hera said, thinking that once she was on record, she could keep the apartment, in case things didn't work out.

He never gave in to anything without a concession. "I want you to swear you'll leave that girl alone," he said. "Promise me you won't turn my Fawn into a cow."

She grinned. "Why not, Zeus? The kid's already got a milky complexion." She sighed and stared past him to the door where a steady stream of underage gate-crashers kept the bouncer busy. "Don't worry. I won't turn that sweet thing into a cow." She crossed her fingers beneath the table. "Well," Hera said, "now that that's all settled . . . tell me what you really

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want with me?" She kept her voice steady, because she did not want him to see how much she cared about his answer.

He paused, as if uncertain. "What do you mean?" he asked. "It should be pretty clear by now how much I love you," he said, sounding almost sincere. "What's it been? Five? Six thousand years that we've been an item? Doesn't that mean anything to you?" He reached across the table to take her hand. Without letting go, he floated his chair close beside her. He lifted her hand to his mouth, gently kissing each knuckle. "What about you, Hera?" Zeus said. "What do you want with me?"

She did not want to tell him, refusing to trust his solicitous behavior. She threw her hands up in the air like it was all a big joke and said, "You'll be hearing from my lawyers. I want more alimony than you gave Metis, your first wife," she said without meeting his glance.

Patting her hand, Zeus smiled. "I've been thinking a lot about settling down these days. Tell me the truth, now. Don't you ever feel old?"

"Old?" she said, keeping the jitter from her voice. "How would I know about old?" She leaned forward to kiss his cheek and he grabbed her shoulders and held her tight. He buried his face in her bosom. Hera rubbed his back and said, "There, there." At that moment, Fawn stumbled into the room, looking lost. Hera felt a surge of power as adrenaline pumped through her.

"I can change the outside of me, but I'm old *inside,* and I can't change that," Zeus was saying. He nuzzled his head against her shoulder and gazed up at her eyes. "Don't you ever wonder if, maybe, there's something *more* than all of this?"

"Poor baby," Hera said, cooing. She squinted at the soft, pale, wisp of a girl, whose hair shone like spun sugar, but managed to keep her voice steady. "Okay," Hera said. "I'll move in with you. When can you help me pack?"

Zeus tilted his head back, then laughed his deep roar. The wine bottle with a half-burnt candle began shaking and tipped over on its side. He let it smolder on the wood for a few seconds before snuffing out the flame.

When Zeus gazed into her eyes she met his glance, but what she pictured was *Fawn.* Magic flowed through her and she turned the girl into a bag of mini-marshmallows and transported the bag into her clutch. Hera felt her stomach knot. At first she assumed it was guilt, but she quickly dismissed the discomfort as being nothing more than a slight case of morning sickness.

"So, Zeus," Hera said. "Do you have plans for later? I'll make dinner."

Zeus brightened. He patted her shoulder. "What a wife!" he said, and Hera heard his stomach growl. "What are we having?"

She felt tired of their game, but wasn't about to forfeit too easily. "Your favorite," Hera said. "My special recipe: Ambrosia salad, the food of the gods, extra heavy on the marshmallows."

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"Hera," he said, watching her warily. His eyes glittered and he hit the table lightly with his fist. "You promised you'd leave her alone!"

"Well, not exactly," she reminded him.

He groaned. "I hope you realize there'll be other girls."

She smiled sweetly and stood, prepared to leave. "But not tonight," she said.

He nodded, signalling defeat. "Okay. You win," he said, "Not tonight. Though I will admit I rather enjoyed making you jealous."

"Me!" she said. "Jealous over a tall blonde? Ha!" She'd show him jealous. After they'd made love, she'd confess that she was pregnant. Zeus would puff himself up to play the part of the proud father. He'd stay that way until the babies were born, when one look into their compound eyes would let him know they weren't *his*. She couldn't wait to see his face then!

She'd show him *jealous* all right! Oh, it might take him a while to get over it, but eventually they'd both get a good laugh out of that one. Maybe she'd even dig out an old tradition and let him eat the babies. That should keep him happy, for a while.

He would leave her again. After all they'd gone through there was no doubt in her mind. But for now, at least, Zeus was hers and hers alone. Hera snuggled inside his strong embrace. Together, they walked arm in arm, toward the door. ●

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Eleanor Arnason

THE DOG'S STORY

Eleanor Arnason's most recent novel was the well-received *Ring of Swords*. This feminist space romance is currently available in trade paperback from Tor. A noted author of anthropological science fiction, Ms. Arnason's most famous book, *A Woman of the Iron People* (William Morrow, 1991), received the James Tiptree Jr. Award for best SF or fantasy work dealing with gender issues and the Mythopoeic Society Award for best adult fantasy novel. In her latest story for *Asimov's*, Ms. Arnason takes a look at a traditional tale from a rather unusual viewpoint.

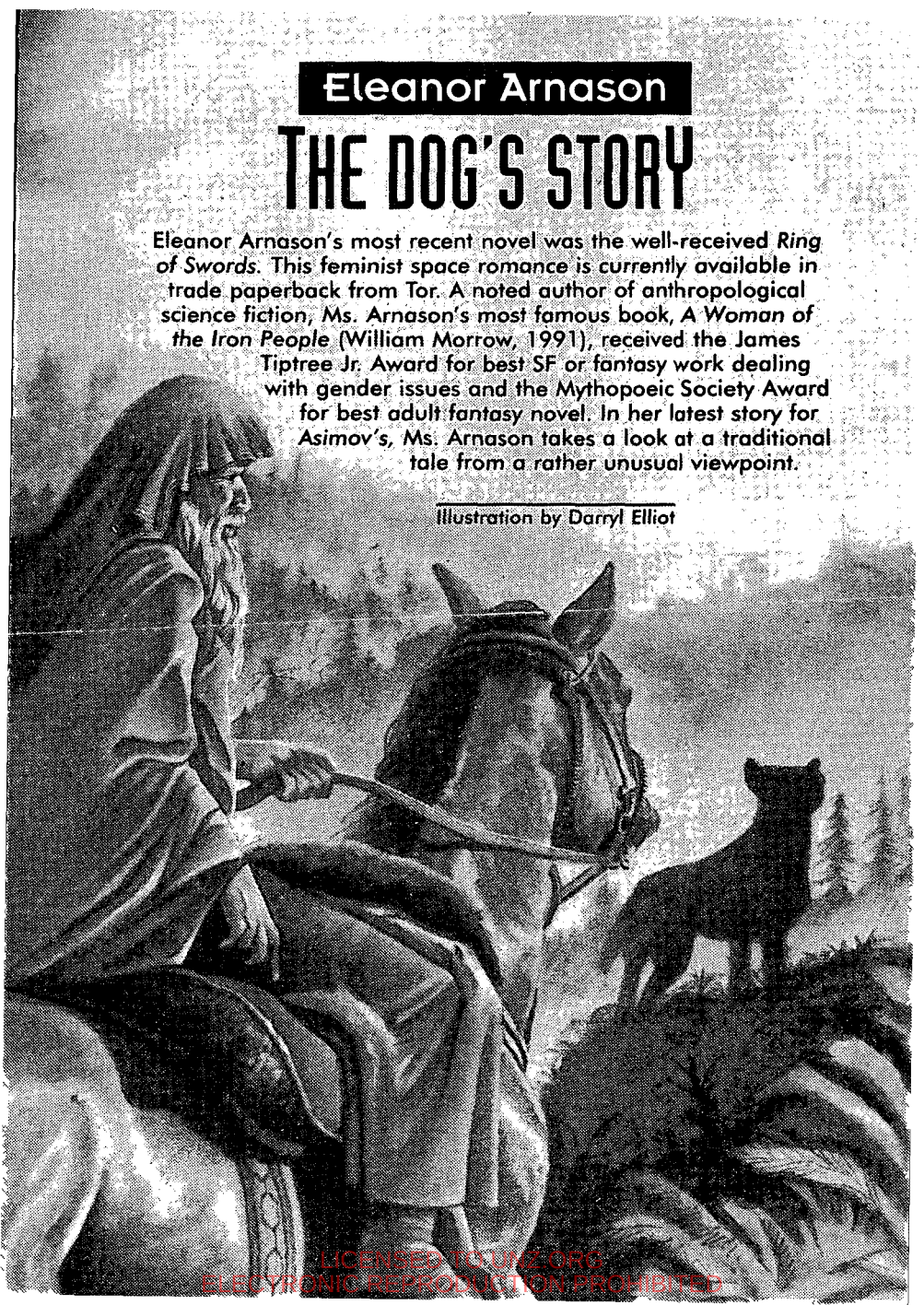

Illustration by Darryl Elliot

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The wizard Merlin, traveling on his monarch's business, came to a ford where a knight was raping a maiden. The rape had just begun, though it had apparently been preceded by a murder. A second man, most likely the girl's companion, lay on the ground nearby, bloody and unmoving. Three horses wandered loose. Merlin reined his own animal and considered the scene to make sure that his first impression was correct.

The girl had already lost her long embroidered belt. The knight held it in one hand, while his other arm assumed the belt's position around the girl's waist. This seemed clear enough to Merlin. It isn't easy to rape anyone while garbed in a knee-length mail shirt. Nor is it easy to pull such a garment off, while holding a struggling woman. Struggle the maiden did, screaming like a peacock, a creature that Merlin had seen—and heard—in King Arthur's menagerie. The knight was planning to tie the girl up, then undress the two of them at leisure.

By this time he had noticed Merlin. He gave the wizard a brief glance, returning to his contest with the girl. An old man on a palfrey could be no threat. After the girl was tied, maybe to the tree that shaded the ford and the two contestants, he'd be free to drive off Merlin or kill him; and then he'd be able to get back to his pleasure, if pleasure was the right word here.

Merlin, who'd been a sensualist in his youth, began to feel anger. This man dishonored all lovers of women and love. The old man straightened in his saddle and lifted a hand. "A cur you are," he cried. "A cur you shall be in the future!"

The knight turned as if jerked at the end of a rope. His armor fell in pieces around him; his clothing vanished; and for a moment he stood naked: a tall, fair, ruddy man with an erection. Then he dropped on all fours. A moment after that, he became a dog. In this form he glanced at the fragments of his mail and at the girl, who was trying to arrange her torn garments. He groaned; it was an oddly human sound to be coming from the dark lips and long curling tongue of a dog; then he ran away.

"You must be a magician," the girl said in the calm voice of one who had experienced too much.

"Evidently." Merlin dismounted and examined the man on the ground. Beyond any question he was dead.

Her brother, the girl told Merlin. They had been on a pilgrimage to a local shrine. On the way back, the false knight had attacked them. Their servants had fled. Her brother had fought and died. "And I was on the road to death when you arrived. What good fortune!"

Merlin kept quiet, knowing the events that occur around wizards are rarely accidental.

They loaded the dead man on Merlin's palfrey, which was not disturbed by blood, and the wizard coaxed the three loose horses, till they

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approached him, lowering their heads, letting him take their reins. Mounted once again, he and the girl went on.

The name of the false knight was Ewen. He was the younger son of a minor baron: a rough, healthy, violent lad, awkward around women. At the time he met Merlin, he was eighteen years old.

Now a dog, he ran through a forest, one of the many that grew in England in those days. If a person wanted to, he or she could travel the length of the king's realm and never leave the forest shadow, except briefly to cross a road or field. Outlaws used this green route, as did fairies and people grown tired of their obligations.

At first Ewen ran at full speed. Becoming tired, he trotted, then walked, pausing now and then to sniff at something that seemed interesting: a dead bat, folded among last year's fallen leaves, a badger's scat, the mark left by a male fox on a tree. Finally, exhausted, he settled in a patch of ferns and slept.

In the morning, he woke hungry and went looking for food. There was plenty, but he'd not hunted on four feet till now. The pungent aromas of the forest confused him. For some reason—who can understand the mind of a wizard, or the paths that magic follows?—the enchantment had not affected his vision. He still saw color as a human would. This was no help; it might even have been a hindrance. In any case, he couldn't see animals in hiding. When the animals leaped out of hiding, he chased but did not catch them, being unaccustomed to his new form, though it was a fine body: large, rangy, fierce of aspect and entirely white except for a pair of blood red ears. Looking in a pool of still water, he saw himself and fled, horrified.

After several days of hunger, he came to a farm. It was nothing much: a rough cottage, a couple of outbuildings that were little more than sheds, and a pen that held pigs.

There was food in the cottage and in the pen. Ewen could smell it, but the scent of people frightened him, and no one in his right mind would climb in a pen with pigs. They were (and are) fierce, strong animals, intelligent enough to know that humans mean them no good. If they can, they'll kill.

He waited till nightfall and slunk close. The pigs grunted angrily. The cottage door opened. Ewen slunk away.

In the morning he hunted again, caught an unwary rabbit and ate it, crunching the bones between powerful jaws. It wasn't enough. He returned to the farmstead.

This time he investigated the outbuildings. One smelled of grain and vegetables, things he'd liked when human, but which did not entice him now. The second hut smelled of meat. Saliva filled his mouth. His tongue lolled out and dripped. He nosed the door. Unfastened, it swung open.

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Even as a man, he hadn't been much for thinking. Now, as a hungry dog, he didn't think at all. Instead of considering the possibility of danger, he pushed inside. The night was moonless and the hut as black as pitch, but he could smell roast pig above him. Ewen leaped and caught nothing, then leaped a second time. On the third try, his teeth closed around a bone. He held on, off the ground and twisting in the darkness. The bone was one of many, fastened together and hung from the hut's low roof. They knocked against each other now and made a loud clattering noise, while Ewen swung below them like the clapper on a bell.

The hut's door closed. A bar came down with a bang. "There!" said the farmer. "He's a fine big dog. Someone must own him, a noble, if looks are anything. Or if not, a noble may buy him."

Merlin delivered the maiden to her father, along with the corpse of her brother. Then he rode on, leading the false knight's charger. For two days, he traveled along the forest's edge, coming at last to an isolated farm.

The farmer made him welcome. Although nobles often ignored or mistook the old man in plain dark clothing, peasants usually realized he was someone important and dangerous, maybe because they actually looked at him.

The farmer's wife prepared dinner. The farmer told Merlin about the dog he'd captured.

"Can I see him?" the wizard asked.

They went to the hut, and Merlin peered through a crack. It was midsummer. The days were long. Rays of sunlight slanted through the hut, and Merlin had no trouble making out the white hound lying on the floor and gnawing bones.

"He's mine," said Merlin. "I'll pay you for your trouble."

The farmer praised his good fortune and Merlin's.

In the morning, Merlin went out to the hut and opened the door. Ewen raised his head. He'd eaten the few shreds of meat on the pig bones, then cracked the bones and licked out the marrow. Now he was bored and ready to leave.

"The man you killed has a father, who has sworn to hunt you down. He hasn't decided whether to kill you or tie you in his courtyard. It might be satisfying to have his boy's killer as a dog by his door. If I leave you here, he'll get you." Merlin tilted his head, considering. "Maybe I should have made you a wolf. You might have lasted longer in the wild. But you don't have a wolf's nature. Come on." The wizard beckoned. Ewen rose and followed.

In the histories, Camelot is a fine lofty city built of stone. In point of fact, it was made of low wood buildings, narrow dirt streets, yards with

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manure and midden heaps. The king's fort stood in the center of the town. *It* was stone, good Roman work from the days before the empire had abandoned Britain, though damaged by time, war, and neglect. Arthur was rebuilding. The gaps in the outer walls had been filled by rubble and logs bound with iron; inside the fort, scaffolding stood against most of the surviving buildings; and heaps of stone were piled next to the scaffolding, ready for use.

Merlin rode in the fortress gate, the captured charger following, the white hound running at his side. Before him, in the large front court, men practiced with swords. Among them was Arthur, a big handsome man just entering middle age. His hair was dark and curly, his face fair, his eyes grey. He was the love of Merlin's life, and both men knew it, though it was never mentioned. Their relationship was too complicated already.

Merlin dismounted stiffly. Arthur called a halt to the swordplay, and they embraced. Then the king asked about the new horse and the white dog that was trying to hide behind Merlin, afraid of all these people, especially the king.

"You know I have a way with animals. They'll follow if I tell them to."

"I know that you don't want to tell the story that lies in back of these new acquisitions. The dog is handsome, though a bit timid. Will you give him to me?"

"I'll give you the horse, but not the dog."

The king frowned, then laughed and accepted the horse.

"Not up to my weight, of course, but I'll find some poor young knight in need of a mount."

Merlin excused himself and went to his quarters, the white hound following. Servants brought him water and a brazier full of coals: the weather was cool, the wizard past his prime. He washed all over and put on a clean robe, then settled with a cup of wine, also brought by the king's servants.

"You're wondering why I refused to tell the king about you," Merlin said to the dog. "One can never tell about Arthur. He might insist that I turn you back into a man. He might want to kill you. I doubt that he'd want to have a former knight fighting over scraps of food in his feasting hall." The wizard snapped his fingers. The dog came near. He ran his hand over the white head and tugged gently at the blood red ears. "Keep close to me for the next few days, till I have a collar made. Gold, I think. You're a noble-looking animal, though as a man you were a failure. I'll have my name and emblem put on the collar. Few people will steal from a wizard, especially the king's wizard."

Ewen nosed the old man's hand, then licked the palm.

It was surprisingly easy to be a dog. Ewen had never been much of a

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talker. Now he didn't have to make the effort. Barks and snarls served for almost every purpose. When they failed, he bared his long sharp teeth. Even the king's dogs gave him room.

Human women had always baffled him. Now, he had no interest in them. It was female dogs that attracted him, and it was far easier to court a bitch in heat than any human woman he'd ever met. Whether high or low in rank, they always seemed to want something Ewen couldn't provide. What the bitches wanted Ewen had and gave willingly.

Arthur, laughing, said, "All the dogs in Camelot are going to be white," then added, "You wouldn't give me the dog, but I'll have his children."

When they were alone Merlin said, "Don't worry about fathering dogs. The king wants his bitches to bear white pups. They will, and the pups will grow up to be everything Arthur is hoping for. But they won't be your children."

Ewen, chewing on an ox bone, had not considered the problem. After all, he'd been a younger son. His children, if any, would not have mattered much, except to his wife. Let them be dogs and hunt for the king! But he was sterile, the wizard said, at least when he mated with dogs.

"I have changed your appearance, but not your essence. You are still as human as ever you were."

Ewen cracked the bone held between his front paws, extended his long, rough tongue and licked the marrow out.

He became famous: the big white dog with red ears and a gold collar who followed the king's wizard through Camelot, lay at Merlin's feet, ran beside his horse. He did not age in the ordinary fashion of dogs, as Arthur noticed.

"Nor do I," said Merlin. "Ewen is a wizard's dog, and he never leaves my side. Magic slows the passage of time, as you ought to have noticed."

This was a reference to the magic in the royal lineage. The king grimaced, not wanting to think about his family or about the family he had failed to produce—unlike Ewen, whose progeny filled the kennels of Camelot, Arthur believed. The queen was childless and increasingly restless.

By this time, Merlin had fallen into the habit of talking with his dog. Ewen had retained his original intelligence, which was considerable. His problem had never been stupidity, but rather greed, rashness and brutality. These were the traits that led him to attack the maiden at the ford and the pig bones in the storage hut. He understood most of what the old man told him, though not everything, of course. He could repeat nothing. Nor could he use what he learned for his own benefit or against his master: the perfect companion for a lonely wizard.

So began a strange double life. In daylight and in public, Ewen was an animal. At night, alone with Merlin, he was an audience for the great wizard's ideas, worries, reflections, speculations. Gradually, under Mer-

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lin's influence, he learned to think, but this process—thinking—had almost nothing to do with his daylight life. There he fought for scraps, mounted bitches, confronted other males, coursed the king's prey, followed at the heels of the king's wisest counselor. Thought belonged to the evening, when Merlin drank wine and tugged Ewen's blood red ears.

In his way, he grew to love the old man. In part, it was a dog's love. In part, it was the love of a man whose own father had been stupid as well as brutish. Strange, maybe, to look at the enchanter who'd made him a domestic animal and see, not an enemy, but a loved father or master. Such things do happen. The heart hath its reasons, which reason knoweth not, as Pascal tells us.

Sometimes, when they were traveling and had stopped for the night in a place distant from other people, Merlin would turn the hound back into a man. Magic *had* slowed time. He looked no more than twenty, fair and muscular. His hair had grown just a little. It fell over his shoulders, curly and shaggy, the color of wheat at midsummer. His eyes were summer blue. His beard was like a wheat field after harvest: blond stubble shining in the light of their evening fire.

In his youth and middle age, Merlin had been a lover of men as well as women. The church forbade this kind of love, of course; but the church also forbade witchcraft and wizardry. Being a scholar, Merlin knew that the basis for these injunctions was a script that also forbade the eating of shellfish. Yet he had seen Christian kings and prelates consume oysters with the zeal of pagan Romans, pausing only to give praise to God for the excellent food. He kept his counsel and did not abandon his inclinations.

In his old age, his passions diminished. Little remained except his love for Arthur, which had always been more familial than anything else. This was the baby Merlin had carried in his arms, the boy he'd watched over, the youth he'd made king. From the beginning, Arthur's future had enveloped him like a cloak or veil of light, visible to Merlin and a few others. The babe in his hands had shone as if swaddled in moonbeams. The boy had seemed garbed in the pale, clear light of dawn. The young man had been like morning.

The veil was still present, though dimmed by age and compromise. At night, when Arthur sat in his feasting hall, surrounded by retainers, Merlin saw glory flicker around the king. Duty and a sense of history transformed the wizard's love, as iron is changed by fire and water.

Ewen was different. Merlin looked at him, on those nights when the two of them camped alone. If the weather was cold enough, the boy would wrap himself in a blanket. Otherwise, he wore nothing except the gold dog collar engraved with Merlin's name. Whatever human modesty he might once have had was gone. He'd been a dog too long.

Merlin remembered lust, and that what was he felt now, stirring in his groin. The boy had no sexual interest in men.

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Merlin could force him and be a rapist. He could seduce him using magic. In either case, he'd be a brute, acting from simple need without regard for reason, consequence or the dignity of his art.

No, the old man thought. Better to end his days a celibate.

Now and then, Ewen seemed briefly uncomfortable, as if he suspected what Merlin was thinking. Usually, he was at ease, though rarely talkative. Even in human form, he preferred to listen.

When Merlin wanted to travel in disguise, he gave the boy clothing, and Ewen became a servant or a young relative. At first, Merlin insisted that he not wear the collar. It was too rich and distinctive. But Ewen missed the weight. It was difficult being a man, he told the wizard. His clothes were binding and scratchy. Women were once again exciting.

"When I see one who seems in heat, I get an erection. But what can I do with it? I know you won't let me push the woman down and mount her. As for seduction, it requires skills I don't have and more time than I'm willing to put in. It isn't time I want to put in, in these situations.

"When men brush against me or give me an insulting stare, I want to growl and bite. I know I could leave marks on them, even with human teeth. But you have told me to be mannerly.

"Let me wear the collar. It reminds me that I'll be a dog again soon. I'll keep it hidden."

Merlin gave in, though with foreboding. The inevitable happened at a little roadside lodging place. A fastening came undone. The innkeeper saw gold gleaming at the boy's throat. That night, six men came to rob the travelers.

In his old age, Merlin slept fitfully, and the robbers made the mistake of waiting. By the time they crept down the hall, the wizard had passed through the deep sleep brought on by fatigue to a state close to waking. The noise they made was enough to rouse him entirely. He roused Ewen, who pulled a sword out of their baggage.

One of the robbers had a lantern made of horn. By its dim light, they saw a man emerge from the travelers' room, naked except for a wide gold collar, bare steel in his hand. The six robbers advanced, made confident by their numbers, their knives and their cudgels. A moment later, the lantern went out, dropped or tossed aside. This proved an advantage to Ewen, who knew he had no friends in the dark hall. He charged, swinging his sword. Deep growls came from his throat, interspersed with yelps and howls. It was the noise that settled the battle. The robbers, stumbling into one another in the darkness and striking out at random, became terrified. Surely this snarling creature was a madman or a demon. They turned and ran. Ewen followed.

Merlin picked up the horn lantern and relit it. Two men lay in the hall. One was dead, his head crushed by a cudgel blow. The other wept noisily,

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holding onto his belly. Blood welled between the robber's fingers. Merlin lifted his hands; the man did the same, as if in imitation. Now the wound was visible. It was deep. Intestines spilled out. A fatal wound, unless the wizard used his magic. Why bother? England was already well supplied with robbers and murderers. On the other hand, no living thing should suffer, if the suffering could be ended. Merlin gestured a second time. The man slept, his hands falling to his sides. The wound continued to bleed.

The other men were in the yard: one dead and two dying. The last robber, a lad of fifteen or so, had scrambled to the top of the manure heap and was slinging dung at Ewen, as the naked man climbed toward him, coated now in blood and excrement. The moon shone down on all of this. The noise was terrific: the dying men groaning and calling out to God, the boy screaming curses, Ewen howling.

"Heel!" called Merlin.

Ewen paused and shook his head as if to clear it, then climbed down to join his master.

"Who planned this?" Merlin asked the boy on the dung heap.

"My brother. The one who keeps the inn."

They searched for the innkeeper, but he was gone.

"When he comes back," said Merlin to the boy. "Tell him that he tried to rob Merlin the wizard, and that his comrades—"

"Our brothers," said the boy. "There were seven of us, and you have killed five."

"Tell him that his brothers were killed by my famous white hound, which I turned into a man for the night. If I ever hear anything about the two of you again, I'll send him back as a dog or a man or something worse than either; and I'll tell him to spare no one."

They cleaned up and left, going into the forest. Merlin guided them with the horn lantern, which shone more brightly than before. They stopped finally. Ewen gathered wood in the lantern's light: by this time it was a second moon, shining under the trees.

"That could lead them to us," Ewen said.

Merlin gestured. The lantern grew dim. Ewen built his fire in almost-darkness. When it was burning well, the lantern went out. The lad cared for their horses, while Merlin sat by the fire. His dark, lined faced looked weary.

At length, the young man joined him, pulling out the sword he'd used against the robbers and making sure that it was entirely clean. That done, he resheathed the weapon and unfastened the collar around his neck. "I'll miss it."

Merlin took the collar and put it away. "You did well tonight. It may be time for you to consider becoming a man."

"I was always good at doing harm," said Ewen. "In any case, it wasn't necessary. You were there. You could have turned them all into toads."

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"Magic has more to do with form than substance," Merlin said after a moment. "If I had turned them into toads, they would have been extremely large toads. It's possible that their new shape and structure—the toad skeletons and muscles and organs—would not have been sufficient given their size, which would have been the size of men. They might have collapsed in on themselves and died of their own weight."

"Small loss," said Ewen.

"If this hadn't happened, you would have been dealing with mouths large enough to swallow you and long grasping tongues." The wizard paused again.

Ewen waited. He'd leaned back on his elbows and stretched his legs in front of him, comfortable in spite of the scratches and bruises he'd gotten in the fight. Tomorrow he'd feel all his injuries, as he knew. Tonight he felt tired and content.

"There is another possibility," the wizard said finally. "Magic likes to follow the rules of nature, to create things that are possible and have existed, if not now, then in the past. If I had tried to enchant the robbers in the way you have suggested, they might have turned into the ancient relatives of toads. Some of these animals were as large as men. Some were carnivores with heads like mastiffs and teeth that could put your teeth to shame."

"My dog teeth?" asked Ewen.

The wizard nodded. "The Flood, or some other catastrophe, destroyed these creatures. The world does not need to see them again."

"You are less powerful than I thought," Ewen said.

Merlin considered, then answered. "For the most part, magic has to do with seeing. I saw your canine nature at the ford. I saw Arthur's future while he was *in utero*."

Ewen knew some Latin by this time, as well as a little Arabic and Hebrew. He had no trouble understanding *in utero*.

"Doing is more difficult," the wizard added. "Though it can be done." He glanced up, smiling. "As you know."

In the morning, they continued, riding through the forest shadow. The road they followed was narrow and grey. Sunlight stippled it like the spots on a trout.

As Ewen had expected, he hurt all over. Conversation might be a distraction. He said, "I've been thinking of those animals, the ancestors of toads. How do you know about them? Are they in the Bible or Aristotle?"

His knowledge did not come from human texts, whether sacred or profane, Merlin said. Rather, he had learned it from the fairies. Humans knew those folk as students of magic, and so they were, but they studied nature with an equal zeal, and they were obsessed with the passage of time. "They have dug out the bones that are preserved in stone, and they know these are not the bones of giants, nor are they unusual mineral for-

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mations. Rather, they are the remains of animals, unlike any animal alive today."

Using magic, the fairy scholars had recreated these ancient animals. "Some are solid and alive," Merlin told Ewen. "The fairies keep them as pets or use them as the prey for their hunts. But most of the animals—especially the enormous ones—are illusory. A reptile the size of a feasting hall would be difficult to make, difficult to feed and possibly dangerous."

Ewen nodded his agreement.

Illusions, on the other hand, were safe, economical, and comparatively easy to make. The fairy scholars could study them, without having to cage or feed them. The fairies who were not scholars could take pleasure in their strangeness.

Ewen asked about the real animals in fairyland, the ones that could fight and had to be fed. Merlin described what he had seen on his visits to the Fair Realm: elephants covered with shaggy fur, pill bugs as big as his palm, a toothy creature with a sail on its back, a toothy creature that ran on two legs and gathered food with sharp-clawed hands.

The shaggy elephants had tusks that curved like hunting horns. The pill bugs had large eyes faceted like jewels. The sail creature was like a salamander, save that it was as big as a man and had a thick, leathery hide. The creature that ran on two legs could be compared to nothing.

The fairies had tried to train these bipeds, as they might have trained ostriches or humans; the creatures proved to be intractably wild. "Instead of being turned into a new kind of hunting dog, they became a new kind of quarry; and the fairies have bred dogs to course them and bring them down. The dogs are your size, when you are a hound, blue-grey in color with hanging jowls and long ears that are usually cropped. They are fearless, as they have to be. The bipeds have great curving claws on their feet, in addition to grasping hands and piercing teeth."

The Fair People were obsessed with all the aspects of time, Merlin told his companion. They studied the future as well as the past, though this area of study was full of challenge and obscurity. The future is always uncertain. Nonetheless, they had managed to create images of what the future might be like, and these also could be encountered in fairyland. "Though these illusions waver and shift and are rarely convincing." The wizard described groups of oddly dressed people, involved in activities that made little sense to him or the fairy scholars, and devices that seemed magical or perhaps like the devices made by ancient engineers such as Daedalus. Cities would appear in the distance, at times as bright as adamant, at other times dark and wreathed in smoke. If one approached the cities, they receded. They could never be reached, nor could travelers get close enough to see them clearly. Instead, the travelers were left with confused impressions—of puissance, valor, and confidence or poverty, sadness, and pain.

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Ewen had small use for illusion or for the future. Better to concentrate on what was present and real. He glanced around. Large ferns lined the road, so green that they seemed to glow with their own light. Farther back, in the forest shadow, fungi dotted the trunks of trees. Ewen recognized a number of kinds and recited the names to himself, as a charm against unreality: Jew's Ear, Dryad's Saddle, Witch's Butter, Poor Man's Beef.

Some of the animals in fairyland sounded interesting: the real ones, not the illusions. Maybe some day his master would take him there. In dog form, he'd chase the bipeds.

That evening they came to a village, and Merlin bought liniment from the local witch, a tall handsome woman of more than fifty. She offered to put the liniment on. "I have the healing touch. But maybe you'd prefer to do this yourself, Merlin."

As much as possible, he did not touch the boy when he was human. In any case, this was a situation that required rubbing rather than magic. His own hands were stiff. He nodded his agreement to the witch's plan, and they entered her cottage: a single room, lit by a fire that flared up as they entered. Herbs hung from the rafters. Sealed pots stood along the walls. A pallet lay in one corner, and there were two three-legged stools. Merlin took one. The witch took the other. The boy settled in front of her on the dirt floor.

It was disturbing to watch the witch's dark strong fingers move over Ewen's back, the pale skin mottled with bruises. The lad's evident pleasure was also disturbing, how he leaned back against the hands, eyes closed and full lips faintly smiling. "Soon," Merlin told himself, "I am going to have an erection, and the witch will notice." It was the kind of thing that witches noticed. She might remember the old gossip about the wizard. It wasn't likely she'd disapprove. It was churchmen, not witches, who called sodomy a sin. But she was likely to make a joke, and then the boy would know for certain what went on in his master's mind.

Merlin excused himself and took a walk by the river. When he got back, the two of them were on the floor, naked and entangled. The boy was incorrigible! Merlin stepped forward, intending to grab Ewen by the scruff of the neck and pull him off the women.

"Get that look off your face," the witch said. "And take another walk. The boy is younger than I am, but old enough to know what he's doing. I used no charms. Both of us are willing."

He went back to the river. Swallows flew back and forth over the water like shuttles in a loom, though they wove nothing except the death of bugs and obedience to their own natures. Merlin waited till darkness, then returned to the cottage a second time.

They spent the night there. Twice Merlin woke to the sound of Ewen

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and the woman coupling. "Patience," he told himself. "You are old enough to have learned patience."

In the morning, the witch gave them food for their journey and a second jar of liniment. "You have a fine big penis," she said to Ewen. "And you're certainly willing to use it. But you lack skill. If your master ever lets you go, come to me. I'll teach you how to fuck properly."

Ewen blushed. The witch laughed.

Late in the morning, Merlin asked, "What would you have done if she'd been unwilling?"

"Have I learned restraint? Some, but probably not enough." Ewen paused to watch a woodpecker flash—black, white, and red—across the road. "It really is easier being a dog."

They traveled north. Rain fell, and the weather was unseasonably cool. Merlin's joints hurt. "We'll stay with lords this time, and I'll be the king's wizard."

Ewen, riding miserably through a misty rain, lifted his head. He'd be a dog again.

"You'll be a youth of good family, not yet a knight."

"Why?"

"I want you to practice being a man."

He said nothing in reply, knowing it was futile to argue with Merlin in weather like this.

"If you forget your manners and act doggishly—well, it's a long distance from the north to Camelot; and these northerners might not even notice."

The lords along the border made them welcome. These were rough men, who guarded King Arthur's realm against the incursions of bandits, infidels and Scots, as well as an occasional monster or dragon. Most were loyal in their way; all knew enough to treat the royal wizard with respect.

Ewen puzzled the lords. A promising lad, but past the age when most northern boys were knighted. He did not seem to be sickly or clerical. Everything in the south went at an odd pace, either too slowly or too quickly; and a lad in Merlin's care must be noble or even royal, though maybe not legitimate. They did not puzzle further. Instead, they loaned him armor and told their younger sons to treat him well.

By days, he practiced the arts of war or hunted on horseback, though he would sooner have run four-footed in the baying pack, as he told Merlin privately.

"Patience," said the wizard.

He killed a boar with a spear, on foot after his horse fell. The lord of that keep offered to make him a knight.

"Not yet," said Merlin. "I'm not satisfied with his manners."

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"What use are manners to a soldier? D'you think dragons care about manners? Or Scots, for that matter?"

"I see things you do not," Merlin said firmly.

The lord grew quiet then.

At another keep, Ewen joined a war band going after thieves who had taken twenty head of the lord's best cattle. They got most of the cattle back, but all the thieves escaped.

When they returned, the lord held a feast, honoring the warriors who'd recovered his favorite cow, a great rough beast with wide horns. "A fountain of milk," said the lord with satisfaction. "And the daughters she's produced! She is a mother of queens!"

Ewen sat among his comrades from the war band, drinking as little as possible and trying to ignore the serving women. This had happened in other keeps. The women brushed against him. The men made sly remarks and gave him mocking names: Master Prudence, Master Silence, the Squire without Reproach.

Always before this, he'd managed to control himself. Tonight, he could feel the control slipping, though he wasn't certain why. The lord's lewd praise for his favorite cow and for the bull they'd recovered? The noisiness in the hall? Or his own weariness, after the long chase toward the Scottish border and over many weeks of self-restraint?

He knew what he wanted: to be a dog again, close to Merlin rather than separated by half the feasting hall. It had never been said aloud, but he knew this would be his reward, if he passed the test that Merlin had set him.

If he did not—Ewen shivered. Merlin might refuse to change him. He might remain as he was, awkward and uncomfortable. Worst of all, the wizard might cast him out to wander through England in human form.

The soldier next to him pushed a woman into his lap. She screamed and grabbed hold of Ewen. He wrapped one arm around her waist and with his other hand pushed up her skirt, knowing what he'd find—a wet furry hole like the witch's, though most likely wetter and furrier. The witch had been old. His penis was engorged. He would mount the woman here. Most likely, the men around him would cheer.

Merlin's hand gripped his shoulder. Merlin's voice said, "Down."

He shivered and withdrew his hand, pushed the girl away and stood. Merlin was sitting next to the lord, having never moved.

"You have a prick," said one of the other men. "We can see it. Why are you so unwilling to use it?"

"A promise," he said with difficulty. "To Merlin."

"Is he teaching you magic? Does that art require that you be celibate?"

"A hard art, if this is so," said a second man.

A third man said, "Nay, if this is so, then we must call magic a soft art, rather than a hard one, for it requires softness rather than hardness in

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those who practice it. Look at our squire now. His male member has diminished to nothing. If we believe him, this is the influence of magic and the wizard Merlin."

Oh God, thought Ewen, turned and left the hall. It was raining again. He stood in the muddy yard, face lifted to the dark sky, a howl forming in his throat. He pressed his lips together. The test was too difficult. He could not endure it. On the morrow, he'd go down on his knees to Merlin and beg for an end.

"No," the wizard said. "You will continue. You did well last night." He reached out a hand, the fingers stiff with age and the weather, and touched Ewen's golden hair. "Surely it is nobler to be what you are now."

"If you hadn't intervened, I would have treated that servant the way I tried to treat the maiden at the ford. How is this noble? These men along the border are animals and do not know it. I know what I am, Merlin. Let me be content."

"Winter draws near," the wizard said finally. "Arthur waits in Camelot. Be patient. Your test is almost over."

The northern foliage began to change. So did the weather, though too late to save most of the harvest. They rode south in sunlight, through drying fields.

"Something in the north has been troubling me," said Merlin. "A sense of darkness, a feeling of oppression. For that reason I stayed as long as I did, talking to the beldams and the local magicians, trying to discover the nature of the problem. I thought a dragon might be stirring or maybe a pestilence was beginning to spread, though most plagues come to us from France."

He stretched his aching shoulders, enjoying the sun's heat. "Maybe the problem was the weather. My vision was cloudy because it was a vision of clouds."

Ewen had pulled his shirt off and rode bare to the waist, his fair skin turning ruddy. Looking at him, Merlin realized how much the lad had changed in the time he'd spent free of enchantment. His adolescent ranginess was gone. Thick muscles covered his long tall frame. His hair, which had been ragged and unruly, was short and neatly trimmed. So was the beard he'd grown. So much in only a summer, the wizard thought.

When they got close to Camelot, they stopped with a farmer, an old friend of Merlin's. That evening, the wizard got out the gold collar. "Are you certain?"

"Yes."

The wizard felt perturbed and must have looked it. "You can't take me into Camelot like this," said Ewen. "How would you explain me? Arthur knows you have no noble ward, and he certainly knows I'm not a royal

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bastard; and if you think I want to listen to orders from Kay or insults from the rest of Arthur's knights—the royal hounds have better manners."

The farm was built in the ruins of an ancient Roman farm. There was a tiled pool that still held water. Ewen bathed carefully—he was always cleanly—dried himself, folded his clothes and packed them, then put on the collar. "Now."

Merlin gestured. Where the man had stood was a white hound, tail wagging, tongue lolling, a look of amusement in the hazel eyes.

Ewen's horse stayed with the farmer, who knew better than to ask questions about the vanished companion or the suddenly present dog. That afternoon, they were in Camelot. Arthur greeted Merlin with a hug and gave the hound a brisk rub over the head and shoulders. "How can I do less for the sire of my kennels?" Then he took his wizard off for a conference. The white hound followed.

They talked first about the harvest in the north, the lords there, the Scottish menace, then about other problems which concerned Arthur: rebellious barons, false knights, rival kings, and a dragon on the Welsh border.

Finally, Arthur got to his chief concern. "It's Guinevere. I know she pines for children."

"Pining" was not a word that Merlin would have used for the queen. She was a large, rosy, healthy woman with enough energy for ten or twenty children. Lacking these children—there were not even any royal bastards for her to gather and raise, except for Borre, who had a perfectly good and noble mother, unwilling to give her son up—Guinevere did her best to keep busy in other ways. Camelot was full of the hangings that she and her ladies embroidered: the deeds of Sir Hercules and King Alexander in the feasting hall, the deeds of the saints and prophets in the royal chapel, blooming gardens in the royal bower and the rooms used by royal and noble guests. This was in addition to all the everyday work a queen must do: managing the king's household, training his pages, greeting his guests of high and low degree—kings, nobles, prelates, bards, and jugglers. Guinevere was especially fond of the jugglers. She was a woman in love with activity.

When Arthur made royal progresses, she accompanied him.

"She stops to visit with every good wife famous for her herbal lore and every hermit famous for his piety," the king said. "It's obvious why. I have the most famous wizard in the kingdom in my employ. I ask again, is there nothing you can do?"

"In the first place, don't presume that you know your wife's mind. Women are not easy to understand. Even I, with my vision, make mistakes about them. In the second place, my liege, I am not a village witch dealing in potions and cures, though I have met one recently who seems

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excellent to me. You can send for her, if you like. If she's honest, she'll tell you that the problem does not lie with Guinevere."

The king's fair skin reddened slightly. "Are you certain?"

"I've told you there's magic in your line. Most likely, one of your ancestors was a fairy. They are slow to reproduce and rarely have more than a child or two. If this were not so, they'd fill the world, since they age slowly and are difficult to kill.

"Sometimes they take our children, raise them and mate with them, hoping to produce offspring who combine fairy magic and endurance with human fecundity. In general, the fairies tell me, these experiments do not achieve the hoped-for end. Most of the half-breed children lack magical ability and die young, being barely a hundred or a hundred and fifty, and they are only slightly more fertile than their fairy relatives."

Merlin paused. Arthur looked uncomfortable.

"It's possible you might have better luck with a fairy wife or with someone who, like you, has fairy blood. But I promise nothing."

The king shook his head. "I love Guinevere. Tell me where to find this witch."

She came to Camelot on a white mare, a fine new cloak over her shoulders. Arthur and Guinevere received her privately. Afterward, she sought out Merlin. He was in his quarters, reading the *Logic* of Aristotle, which a learned Jew of Cairo had translated into Latin and sent to the wizard in return for a book on fairy natural history. The white hound slept at his feet.

Merlin greeted the woman and poured wine for her, which she tasted before she spoke. "I could have said 'no' to the king, but not to that sweet lady. Where's your serving man? Has he left you?"

"No."

She laughed. "You've hidden him, for fear that I'll seduce him."

Merlin stirred the white dog with a foot. Ewen, who was dreaming of deer or possibly of bipeds, made a wuffing sound.

"What did you tell them?" Merlin asked the witch.

She tried the wine a second time, giving it so thorough an assay that Merlin had to refill her cup.

"I gave the queen a potion that will calm her. In my experience, women who fret have trouble breeding, especially if the thing they fret about is their infertility. Why this is, I don't know, though worry can disrupt the behavior of the body in many ways. Also, it's possible that the queen's activity—especially the traveling she does—is having an adverse effect on her female functions, though I have certainly known farm wives who worked as hard as any queen and bred like rabbits.

"I'm not happy with the number of shrines she visits. Or with the hermits. A pestilent lot! Full of vermin and bad advice! I told her to travel

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less, and if she must talk with religious folk, let them be seemly nuns and clerics who wash."

Merlin smiled and stirred the dog again. This time Ewen was silent.

"I told the king to wear loose clothing whenever possible. Monks and priests have no trouble fathering children. I have long suspected it's their clothing that makes them fertile."

"None of this will do any harm," said Merlin. "No good either, I fear."

"I could not say 'no' to the lady," the witch replied, finished her wine and rose to go. Merlin escorted her to the door of his quarters. She glanced up at him, her face flushed with wine. "I'm going to the kitchen to brew a tisane for Sir Kay. He suffers from headaches, he has told me. After that, I'll go to my room. I would like company, if your serving man is free and willing."

Merlin closed the door behind her, then walked back to his study. The white hound was up on all fours, ears lifted and tail wagging.

"Do you think you can behave in a seemly fashion, like a knight, instead of a cur?"

The tail-wagging grew more furious.

"Very well," the wizard said after a moment. "I imagine this woman can take care of herself, but you are to act as if she were the mildest and silliest of maidens. Do you understand?"

The dog wagged harder.

Laughing, Merlin changed him into a man. He dressed quickly, pulling clothing from one of Merlin's chests, then hurried through the palace, already dark in the early evening of autumn.

In dog-form he had explored every corridor; and he had no trouble finding the witch's lodging-place. (In any case, she had described the location to Merlin.) At the moment, it was empty, unlit and as black as pitch. But the witch's aroma was everywhere. He could smell it through all the other odors: the dry herbs in the bedclothes, the dry rushes on the floor, the dust in corners and—very faintly—a mold.

He undressed and realized, when he was done, that he was still wearing the hound's gold collar. No time to take it back to Merlin. He wanted to be in the room when the witch arrived. He unfastened the collar and hid it in the middle of his clothing, then settled on the bed, among blankets that smelled of herbs and the woman.

She took longer than he had expected, in his eagerness. At last, the door opened. The witch entered, carrying a lamp. In the dim glow cast by it, she took on the appearance of a young matron, blooming the way some women do after their first few children.

Ewen raised himself on an elbow. She glanced at him, her dark eyes shining, then laughed and blew out the light.

He listened to the sound of her undressing, then felt her settle on top of him, astride his hips. In this fashion they coupled the first time: the

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witch on top and riding like a knight in a tournament.

The second time was side by side. They were both less eager than the first time. Their coupling was slow, gentle, and affectionate. When they finished, Ewen fell asleep.

He woke to lamplight. The witch stood in the middle of her room, dressed in a plain white shift. In one of her hands was the lamp, now relit. Her other hand held his gold collar.

"How have I deserved this?" she said.

Puzzled, he did not answer.

"I am a woman of no great birth, never beautiful, no longer young—those being the only virtues a village woman may have, as I know. My skills are nothing much, compared to Merlin's art and science. Your master might well look down on me. But to play such a trick! To make me couple with his dog!"

Now Ewen understood the expression on her face. As quickly as possible, he explained he was a man. "Though I have spent most of my time as a dog in recent years. Still, I began my life in human form, and my birth was gentle."

"Why did Merlin turn you into a dog?"

Ewen flushed with shame, sat up and told the story of his life before he met the wizard.

The witch listened, frowning. When he finished, she said, "I'm glad that Merlin did not trick me into an act contrary to nature, which requires us to mate with our own kind. But it doesn't sound as if you're much of a man."

He flushed again and nodded.

"Though you were young and had a bad upbringing. That much is evident. Have you learned to do better?"

"I don't know."

She glanced at the collar and held it out. "Put it on."

He obeyed, then looked up. The witch wore a smile that combined affection with malice. "It certainly is a fine piece of jewelry, fit for a prince or king; and now that I know you're a man, I like how it looks on you." She set the lamp down, came over, bent and kissed him, one hand resting on his shoulder. Her fingers touched the collar. He could feel her caressing the gold links.

He pulled her down, pushing up the shift, which was made of wool, coarse and prickly. They coupled a third time, with less vigor than the first time, but more passion than the second, then slept tangled together.

At dawn, he returned to Merlin's quarters. The wizard had spent the night with Aristotle and was still up, a lamp burning next to him.

Ewen told him about the witch's discovery, then added, "I will never know enough to be a man."

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"What makes you say that?" asked Merlin.

"Why was she disgusted by the collar, then enticed by it?"

"That's a question she will have to answer, though every witch and magician knows that things have many qualities that can be called accidental—or, if these qualities are not entirely accidental, then they are capable of variation, depending on context and use. The same herb may be a medicine or a poison. A knife can be used for surgery or murder. A gold collar on a man does not have the same meaning as a gold collar on a dog.

"Also—" The wizard closed his book. "Actions performed in knowledge and through choice are not the same as actions performed in ignorance, without decision. No one likes to be tricked."

Ewen frowned, not understanding much of this. Merlin told him to go to bed. When he woke again, midway through the morning, he was a hound.

The witch left, having promised Merlin that she would keep Ewen's secret. "If you ever decide to let him remain a man, send him to me. He needs teaching, and not by men. This father of his seems to have almost ruined him, and I'm not certain about the education you have given him."

For a while after that, Guinevere took the witch's potion, and Arthur wore long robes, made by his wife and richly embroidered, so he looked (his knights said) as fine as a priest at mass.

But the potion made Guinevere languid and drowsy. She missed her energy. Kay the seneschal took Arthur aside and told him in full what the knights were saying.

"You can't keep the respect of rough fellows like these, if you dress like a priest or a lady. This isn't Constantinople or even Rome."

Arthur sighed and nodded.

"Just as well," Merlin said later to his white hound. "The queen was nodding off in the middle of banquets, and Arthur could not learn to manage his robes. He kept tripping over the hems."

Ewen listened, while chewing on his flank. Something itched in an infuriating fashion.

"Do you have fleas again?" Merlin asked, but didn't wait for an answer. "I've not told this to anyone, but the king is not fated to have a legitimate heir. I have seen this and also seen—" Merlin paused. "Harm will come to him from a child he fathers. I've been watching young Borre for years now. He seems a harmless lad. Maybe he'll turn malevolent as he ages, or maybe there is someone else I don't know about. My vision isn't as clear as it used to be. Time vanquishes everything."

Not you, thought Ewen.

The beginning of the end was ordinary: one of Arthur's fellow kings came to Camelot on a visit, bringing in his train a maiden, slim and

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comely with black eyes and hair. Her face was pale, except for a faint blush in the cheeks, as if wild roses—the kind that bloom along every road in spring—bloomed there. Her name was Nimue.

In the old story, it says that Merlin became "sotted," a word that means "foolish, stupid, drunk, or wasted." A sot is a dolt, a blockhead or a soaker: harsh words to use on a man so old, wise, and learned.

What happened was this: Nimue was interested in magic. While the king she followed spent time with Arthur, she sought out Arthur's ancient wizard, drawn by his wisdom and learning. Even his age was attractive, or so she explained to Merlin. Wisdom is not found in the young. Nor is true learning, which requires not only memorization, but also pondering and the testing of learned truths by experience.

Merlin, in his turn, was attracted by her interest in magic, as well as by her beauty. Ewen disliked her at once, though she fawned on him, rubbing his red ears and his snow-white neck and shoulders, praising him to his master. What a fine dog! How handsome and famous! He wanted to bite her.

How could Merlin, the wisest man in England, fail to see the calculating look in Nimue's dark eyes and fail to hear the falsity in her honey-sweet voice?

Maybe falsity is too harsh a word. Beyond any question Nimue was interested in magic and respected Merlin as a magician. But she had no interest in him as a man, as Ewen could tell by her odor and her expression, when Merlin turned away from her.

Merlin, on the other hand, was in love, as he had not been for years. That a woman so young and fair and graceful should be drawn to him! She was intelligent, as well, and knew something of magic already, enough to ask him good questions. She listened to his answers intently, her dark eyes fixed on him.

Ewen, at Merlin's feet, felt the fur on his back prickle and his upper lip lift. A growl was forming in his throat. He pushed his head down between his paws, trying to keep his hatred hidden, telling himself to be patient. The visiting king would not stay forever. When he left, he'd take the woman, and Merlin would recover.

So it went, through late spring and early summer, until the king—Nimue's host and Arthur's guest—made ready to return home. Merlin asked Nimue to stay in Camelot.

"The city is growing hot," she said in answer. "Soon it will be filled with flies and foul aromas. I will not remain in such a place. Nor should you, Lord Merlin. A man as venerable as you, a repository of so much knowledge, should guard himself against discomfort, which can lead to disease." She added that she had a villa in the country. "Which the ancient Romans built and my relatives restored to its former splendor and dignity. Come there with me."

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That evening, at the end of yet another long feast and drinking bout in honor of Arthur's guest, Merlin walked back to his rooms. Ewen was beside him. The dog was uneasy, nudging his master and nipping at the old man's hand. When they were alone, Merlin changed him and said, "What is it?"

It had been months since Ewen had been a man. Something had happened. He no longer felt comfortable with nakedness. His human body seemed horribly bare. It was difficult to stand upright and face the wizard, who was frowning at him, obviously angry. Prescient as always, the old man knew he wasn't going to like what Ewen had to say. The youth thought of dropping back down on all fours, so his belly and genitals would be protected. Instead, he pulled a robe from one of Merlin's chests and put it on.

"Speak!" said the wizard.

Ewen tried, but he'd never been good at talking, and most of what he knew was canine, having to do with Nimue's scent and the tone of her voice, the way she moved, how her hands felt when she petted him or tugged his ears. The woman was selfish and dishonest. As wise as Merlin was, he was being tricked.

The wizard listened. His eyes—usually a soft faded blue, like cloth washed many times and laid out in the sun to dry—darkened, becoming the hard blue-grey color of steel. Ewen faltered and finally stopped.

"Do you think I'll listen to a dog about such matters? Or to a rapist? You have not learned much, have you, in all your years at Camelot? Not respect for women, nor courtesy, nor chivalry. My fault, I suppose. I should have kept you a man and sent you to the witch or to a monastery. What can a dog learn, except obedience and odors?"

Loyalty and love, Ewen thought. A dog can learn those as well. But he could not force his tongue to move and speak.

"I intend to go with Nimue," the wizard said. "If you wish, you can stay here. Arthur will take good care of you, though he will treat you like a dog, as I never have. Or you can go to the witch in human form. That might be best."

And leave the old man with Nimue, who stank of falsity? No. Ewen shook his head. "Take me with you."

Merlin pondered, saying finally, "If I do, you will have to remain a dog. I want no more conversations like this one."

Ewen agreed.

The three of them set out several days later, the wizard and maiden on palfreys, Ewen running beside them in dog form. The weather was pleasant, once they left the closeness of Camelot, and their journey ordinary. Because he traveled with a woman, Merlin stopped in the houses of noblemen and the hostels maintained by religious orders. In most of these places, Ewen stayed in the stables. Every morning, it seemed to him, Merlin looked happier and younger, though the wizard did not smell of

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satisfied lust. Nor did Nimue smell like a bitch who'd been mounted. Her odor remained the same as always: a combination of eau de rose and something Ewen could not put into words: self-containment, aloofness, an absence of sensuality so marked that it became a presence.

It was not lust that had transformed the wizard, but rather love and hope.

The villa, when they reached it, proved to be on an island in the middle of a lake and hidden by trees, so no one on the lake shore could tell the island was inhabited.

They left their horses and rowed across in a small boat. Ewen, at the prow, felt his fur go up. Something about this place was uncanny. Merlin, pulling the heavy oars, noticed nothing except his own strength—surprising in a man of his age—and a sense of happiness.

It was, in fact, a Roman villa, restored as if by magic, though a bit dusty at the moment. The floors were covered with mosaics and the walls with paintings: the deeds of Dame Venus, portrayed in the style of the ancients but with colors so fresh and bright that they could not be genuinely Roman. In one room, she rose from the ocean, as naked and lovely as a pearl. In another room, Prince Paris awarded her the golden apple. A third room showed her husband Vulcan exposing her adultery. The goddess lay with the war god Mars, the two of them imprisoned by a net, which Vulcan had made through magic and thrown over them, as they coupled. Mars grimaced, and rage was evident on Vulcan's face, but the lovely goddess remained tranquil, faintly smiling, as if none of this—her infidelity, her exposure, the trap that held her—mattered.

Nimue guided them through the villa, then out into the garden that surrounded it. If she had servants, they were careless. The garden had a half-wild look. Still, it was full of mid-summer flowers, roses especially. Sweet aromas filled the air.

Some of his old acuteness returned to Merlin. "This place is a wonder. Who are your relatives?"

Nimue smiled. "I have kin in fairyland."

She settled on a marble bench, and Merlin settled next to her, Ewen at his feet, panting a little in the midday heat. There, in the overgrown and aromatic garden, the maiden told her story. She was one of the fairy experiments, not an ordinary hybrid but the product of generations of interbreeding between fairies and the human children they stole. In the end, it had been decided that the experiment was a failure. Her line would not be continued.

"The fairies had no further use for me, and I did not wish to stay in their country. There is enough of them in me so I'm not especially affected by their enchantments. Pure humans are and rarely leave, if they have the chance to stay, though you have come and gone many times, as I have heard."

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Merlin said, "Yes."

She picked a rose and turned it in her hands. "They would have let me stay. They recognize their obligation to me and the other hybrids. But I didn't want to be a poor relation, and I didn't want to grow old, while my cousins remained as fresh and blooming as this rose."

While she spoke, she tore at the rose, apparently without noticing what she was doing. When she glanced down finally, nothing remained in her hands except the stalk. Her lap was full of bright red petals. Nimue laughed and stood, brushing the petals off, then invited Merlin into the house.

They remained there for the rest of the summer, while Merlin taught Nimue about magic. She had little interest in the other things he knew: the logic of Aristotle, the philosophy of Plato, the medicine and mathematics he had learned as a young man, traveling in India and China. Now and then, she would permit the old man to speak of such things. Ewen listened, feeling more comfortable with human knowledge than with the spells that fascinated Nimue.

The house remained empty except for the three of them. Meals appeared out of the air. So did music, pipes and stringed instruments playing through the long summer evenings. The musicians were never visible, nor were the instruments they played.

Though the house was always a little dusty and slovenly, it never became dirty. It was being cleaned somehow, by someone, though never thoroughly. This was no surprise to Ewen. Merlin had told him years before that the stories humans told about the excellent work of spirits were untrue. "Some are quick, but also careless and slipshod. Others are so meticulous that they finish nothing. Their idea of what's important is not the same as ours. With the best will in the world—and they often lack good will—they can't do a job to our satisfaction."

The garden remained ragged, but never turned entirely wild. Sometimes, in the morning, they would find bouquets throughout the house, filling the rooms with sweet aromas. Merlin must be doing this, thought Ewen. The old man remained sotted. Now that they were alone, away from other people, his passion grew stronger and more obvious. He began to court Nimue as a lover would, praising her beauty, speaking of his own desire, creating illusions to amuse and entice her.

Some days, the mountains of China rose outside the villa, tall and strangely shaped. Mist floated among them. The sky above was pearly grey. Now and then, Ewen saw a flash of green or blue. At first, he thought these were breaks in the clouds through which he could see the sunlit upper heavens. No, as Merlin explained to Nimue. The flashes of color were Chinese dragons. Unlike the local English dragons, who were compounded largely of earth and fire and liked living underground and causing trouble, the oriental dragons were creatures of air and water,

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who lived in the clouds as well as in lakes, rivers, and the Great Eastern Ocean. As a rule, they were beneficent, though powerful and very proud.

On other days, Ewen went out and found the meadows of fairyland. Animals grazed there such as he had never seen before: huge quadrupeds, their faces and necks covered with helmets made of bone and skin. Three horns—as straight and sharp as lances—protruded from each armored face.

He ran out among the animals, barking from pleasure. They, being illusions, ignored him. Still, it was pleasant to trot past gigantic leathery haunches and catch the gleam of a tiny eye, the pupil a vertical black line across an orange iris, or to sit and watch some massive cow or bull—he could not distinguish the sexes—shear grass with a great curving falcon-like beak.

Nimue was interested in the dragons, since they were magical. The quadrupeds were not, and she had seen them often before. "Make them vanish," she said to Merlin. The old man did.

She remained cool and aloof, interested in the wizard's skill, but not his body. Would any body have interested her? A handsome young knight? A fairy lord? The dog could not tell. She always smelled of distance and self-control.

Merlin's passion continued to grow, and his courtesy decreased. He began to stand close to Nimue and touch her as if by accident, his old withered hand brushing her arm or the fabric over her thigh. He spoke of his love, usually indirectly—hinting, making allusions, frowning, and heaving sighs.

She was growing angry. Ewen could see this and smell it. But she would not send the old man away. She was too curious, too anxious to have Merlin's power and knowledge.

So the summer ended: in dry heat and a conflict of wills. Now, instead of flowers, Ewen smelled dying vegetation, the old man's frustrated lust, the woman's anger and dislike, which she hid from Merlin, but could not hide from Ewen. A bad situation! Beyond any question the woman was dangerous. He needed to speak with Merlin, to issue a warning. But how could he? The old wizard had to change him. Ewen nosed and licked Merlin's hand, whined softly, stared beseechingly.

"No," the wizard said. "I told you, no further conversation. You came here as a dog. A dog you will remain."

He had reached the limit of his endurance. He could no longer bear the sight of Merlin fawning over the woman, all his dignity and wisdom forgotten, sharing his magical knowledge with Nimue, giving her with open hands the power that made him the greatest wizard alive. In the end, Ewen knew, she would turn on his master.

Very well. If he could not speak as a man, he would act as a dog.

One morning he came upon Nimue in the garden. The day was already hot. She stood by a rose bush, as languid and drooping as the plant's last

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blowzy flowers, which she gathered, bending slightly, her long white neck exposed. The two of them were alone; and as far as he could tell, the woman did not realize that he was in the garden. He attacked, going straight for her throat.

The moment he began to move, she whirled, flinging her basket of flowers aside and raising an arm. His teeth closed on tender flesh, but it was not the flesh of her throat. Nimue screamed.

A moment later Merlin was with them.

The old man said nothing. Nor did he lift a hand. But Ewen felt as if he'd been struck by a giant. He let go of Nimue, falling to the ground and cowering in the dust of the garden path. The other two ignored him. The woman stood absolutely straight, holding her arm, from which blood gushed. Her lips were pressed together. No sound emerged.

The wizard touched her gently. The flow of blood stopped; the wound closed; and there was no evidence of Ewen's crime, save the bright splotches of blood on Nimue's white gown.

"Is the dog mad?"

Merlin glanced at Ewen. "He has no disease, if that's what you are asking."

"Kill him," Nimue said.

For a moment, Ewen thought the wizard would do it. Then Merlin shook his head. "I've had the brute for a long time. I won't kill him, even now. But I will tie him up."

He snapped his fingers. Ewen rose and followed him to the back of the garden. An old stone hut stood there, a storage place for garden tools and pots. Merlin led him inside. Ewen stood shaking in darkness while the wizard rummaged and found an iron collar fastened to an iron chain.

His gold collar came off; the iron collar was fastened in its place.

"When I have time, when I'm not otherwise occupied, I will decide what to do with you," Merlin said. He left the hut, closing and locking the door. Ewen began to whine. The wizard rapped on the door. Ewen found that he could make no noise.

At first, he lunged at the end of the chain, trying to break it and reach the door. At the same time, he tried to bark and howl. Neither effort produced any result, except his throat became sore, and the iron collar rubbed his neck until it was raw.

Finally, he gave up and sat. What had happened? Had he really been trying to kill Nimue? He reflected on the question, while licking his chest and paws. Some of Nimue's blood had spurted onto him. It tasted of salt and magic. Yes. Murder had been the plan, though not a deeply considered plan, but rather the impulse of a moment. Still, he had failed another test of chivalry. After years at Camelot and in Merlin's care, he'd ended as he began: a bad dog imprisoned in a hut, waiting for who knew what kind of punishment.

Ewen lay down in the dark, staring at the hut's locked door. A whimper

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formed in his throat like a tic that wouldn't go away. He couldn't release it, though he opened his mouth and yawned and shook his head, trying to break the noise free.

Late in the afternoon, two dishes appeared in the hut: one of water, the other of meat. Ewen ate and drank, then went to sleep.

He remained in the hut all autumn. Every day food and drink appeared, and his waste products vanished. The hut never became filthy, though it always smelled of dirt and dog. The sores on his neck became scabby and itched. Bugs came into the hut and bit him. These wounds itched as well. No one visited except the bugs and, now and then, a field mouse. The mice were timid and quick. He never managed to catch one.

In the high corners of the hut were spiders. They spun webs, catching a few of the bugs that tormented Ewen, like angels helping the damned just a little. Enough light shone in through cracks in the door so he could see his benefactors: little round bodies glowing in the sunlight, with as many legs as angels had wings.

The punishment was just, Ewen concluded. He had failed as a man and a dog.

And what was going on with Merlin? How could such a man succumb to lust and folly? The old man had, though Ewen was reluctant to admit this. Still, the dog thought, nosing at the problem, if he knew nothing else—not honor, not chivalry, not courtesy—he could recognize the urge to mount a bitch.

If Merlin had wandered from the *via media* and lost himself in wilderness, what hope was left for lesser men? Who could live wisely, if the wise could not? The problem was an itch, almost as painful as his bites and sores. He worried it whenever he was unoccupied by bugs, mice, or spiders. No answer came to him.

One day the door opened. Nimue stood before him, rimmed with sunlight. She gestured, and he felt himself change, becoming a man. The iron collar remained around his neck.

Nimue looked him over. "I wondered what lay under your enchantment. You're certainly handsome enough. Why couldn't Merlin be satisfied with you?"

He tried to speak and couldn't. She gestured a second time.

"He wasn't a man who fell in love with men," said Ewen. "What's happened to him?"

"Of course he was a lover of men. Did you know nothing about him? And of women also, of course. He would not leave me alone, though I tried every way I could to hint him off."

Ewen went up on one knee. It seemed more decent than standing, naked as he was, and less humiliating than remaining on all fours. He leaned cautiously against the chain. It held. The collar cut into his neck. "Where is he?" His voice sounded rough.

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"Under a stone. A big one, which ought to serve to hold him down, though he lifted it with a gesture. There was a treasure under the stone, which he wanted to show me. He was always trying to show me wonders, as if they could win me. As a teacher, yes. I wanted nothing more than to be his student. But his leman? No.

"He went into the pit beneath the stone, the stone hanging above him, held in midair by magic; and he opened the chests and jars that held the treasure, pulling out—oh, necklaces and bracelets made of gold, silver goblets with satyrs dancing on them, bowls engraved with nymphs and goddesses, and glass that had been transmuted by time, so it shone as many-colored as an opal. All the while he smiled at me from a face made of wrinkles.

"I knew the charm he used to raise the boulder and used it bring the boulder down."

"He's dead then," said Ewen, his heart full of sorrow.

Nimue shook her head. "It's not easy to kill a man so powerful. He is trapped beneath the stone and tangled in the spells he set to guard the place. But most likely he's still alive and will remain so."

"This was a bad action," Ewen said. "Unkind, discourteous, ungrateful, and lacking in respect. He was your teacher, an old man and very wise."

"Don't talk to me of courtesy and kindness. He made you a dog and chained you in this hut; he was after me day and night to have sex with him. Was this courteous? Or kind? Did he respect my maidenhood or your manhood? Who knows what he might have done next—a man of such great power, no longer held in rein by reason?"

Ewen frowned, trying to puzzle out right and wrong. "I'm here as punishment, for trying to harm you and for other crimes."

"Is that so? I could ask what you've done. But it's not my concern. Nor does it interest me." Nimue turned as if to go.

"I'll die here, if you leave me chained."

She turned back. "Then you have an argument with Merlin. You don't believe you deserve what's happened to you."

"I'd prefer not to die, especially here and now. As to my deserts, I can't answer you. I don't think Merlin would have killed me or let me die."

She tilted her head, considering. He waited, still on one knee. Finally she snapped her fingers. The iron collar opened and fell away.

Ewen leaped to his feet, lunging at Nimue. He moved less quickly and gracefully that he had before his imprisonment. None the less he reached her.

As soon as he laid hands on her, she turned into a dragon of the western variety, as black as iron, rather than blue or green. Magic is mostly illusion, Ewen told himself and held on tightly. The dragon twisted its long serpentine neck, opened a mouth full of teeth like daggers and spat a gout of fire into his face.

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He screamed with pain, but his grip did not loosen, though his face felt as if a mask of red hot metal had been fastened over it, which burned through skin and flesh to the bones of his skull.

The pain should have killed him or at least made him let go. It didn't. *Ergo,* it was illusion.

As soon as he decided this, the dragon became a fish as long as he was tall. It thrashed in his arms: cold, slimy and powerful. Better than a dragon, Ewen thought, though difficult to hold. He tightened his grip further. His face still hurt.

The fish became an eagle, which he gripped around the lower body. The creature beat him with broad strong wings. As the feathers brushed his face, he felt pieces of flesh fall away.

The bird lasted only briefly, turning into a spotted cat that screamed (a sound like the scream of an eagle) and bit Ewen in the neck. Blood, his own blood, ran into Ewen's lungs. He was drowning.

The cat became a troll with green skin and foul stinking breath. Ewen's arms were locked around the creature's torso. Its arms were free and beat his head and shoulders like a pair of hammers, wielded by two strong smiths. His face was almost gone by now, and blood filled his lungs, so he was no longer able to breathe. What an illusion! His old master was without equal, and Nimue had obviously been an exceptional student.

The troll became a slim young man, who stood quietly in Ewen's arms. The lad had all of Nimue's beauty, transformed so it (and he) was clearly masculine.

"Well," said the youth. "You are certainly brave, or else extremely stupid. I can't tell which. Why are you holding me?"

"I won't let you go till you promise to free Merlin," Ewen said. He looked down at the lad and thought, why should I trust him? This is still Nimue. "I won't let you go till Merlin is free."

The youth shook his head. "You're no danger to me. But if the old man were free and had the use of his powers, there's no place on Earth where I'd be safe."

"Then you are trapped, as he is trapped," said Ewen.

"Don't be ridiculous," said the youth and clicked his tongue.

Ewen's arms fell to his sides, heavy and powerless. His entire body seemed made of stone.

The youth stepped back, and Ewen could see him clearly for the first time. Dark curls fell around his shoulders. His straight young torso was garbed in fine mail; a sword with a jeweled hilt hung at his side; and his tall boots were made of a leather so thin and soft it must have come from fairyland or Constantinople. Ewen had never seen a knight or squire more comely or better dressed.

"Can you swim?" Nimue asked.

"Not well."

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"I'll send the boat back for you. By the time this spell wears off, I'll be long gone. Don't bother to look for me or Merlin. You won't find either of us. If you get hungry, there are plants in the back of the garden. My kin brought them from a land in the distant west. Their fruit will give you both food and drink. Farewell." The lad turned and walked off, stepping lightly and whistling with right good cheer. Long after he'd vanished from sight, Ewen heard the whistle, still clear but growing gradually fainter, as if Nimue were departing into an unimaginably distant place. A trick of magic, Ewen thought, or a rare natural phenomenon. Still it was disturbing to hear the high clear music recede farther and farther.

Late in the afternoon, he found himself able to move. He stretched cautiously, then felt his face. It seemed as always. There was no charred flesh, no burning mask. His throat was not torn open, though it certainly felt sore.

So much to the good. He went to the villa. The rooms were empty of furniture. Carpets of dust covered the mosaic floors. The frescoes looked old and faded, as if years had passed instead of weeks. He searched every corner, though without much hope. There was only dust and cobwebs. His gold collar was gone. So were the clothes that Nimue and Merlin had brought.

In the end, he realized that he was going to find nothing; and he was filthy and hungry. He went to the shore of the island. The boat was there, waiting for him, oars shipped. He waded in next to it and washed.

After he was done, he looked at his reflection. What his hands had told him was confirmed by vision. His face was the same as always. The damage done by Nimue had been illusory. Though he'd never been vain about his human body, Ewen felt relief.

He pulled the boat farther up on shore and returned to the garden. The plants described by Nimue were there: knee-high, bushy, laden with round red fruit that was obviously too heavy for the branches. Narrow stakes had been driven into the ground, and the branches fastened to them. In spite of this support, the plants drooped, so heavy was the load they bore. He picked a fruit. Sun-warmed, almost certainly ripe, it lay comfortably in his palm. Now that he looked closely, he could see it was not perfectly round, but rather flattened at top and bottom. Grooves ran down it, dividing the flesh—soft under the thin skin—into lobes. Of what did the fruit remind him? An undersized melon? A new kind of apple?

In truth, the fruit resembled nothing he had seen before.

Was it poisonous?

Nimue could have killed him easily, or left him chained in the hut to starve. She meant him no harm, apparently, though he had tried to kill her.

Ewen took a bite. The fruit was juicy with a flavor that combined sweetness and sharpness. Both food and drink, Nimue had said. He re-

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membered her words as liquid ran down his chin. The fruit had seeds, too many to pick out, so he ate them, then licked his palm to get the last of the sweet, acidic juice.

He was a man again, with no clothing, no weapons, no money, no master, no home. Merlin was under a stone, which stone he did not know; and he lacked the skill to free his master. Nimue had vanished. He doubted that he'd be able to find her. In addition—he counted over his problems, while his throat grew tight with grief—winter was not far off. The fairy fruit might survive cold and snow. He would not. If he stayed on the island, he'd freeze and maybe starve.

He sat a while longer in the dust, October sunlight pouring over him, the warm air full of the scent of the fairy bushes, weeping for Merlin and himself. For the most part, his weeping was silent. Now and then he groaned. It was a harsh, human sound.

At last he ate another fruit, taking pleasure in the combination of sweetness and acidity, also in the way the liquid felt running down his raw throat. A thought had come to him, and he returned to the hut where he'd been a prisoner.

The two dishes that had provided food for him were empty. That magic had ended, as he might have expected. But the spirits who had taken everything from the house had not been told to clean here, or else they had forgotten, as minor spirits often did. The iron collar and chain still lay on the dirt floor, and the corners were full of piled up pots and tools. He even found a gardening smock, folded in an ancient battered basket.

He need not go into the world entirely empty-handed. The basket would serve to carry some of the fairy fruit. The smock might hold together, though the fabric was old and badly worn. If he took the tools, the scythe especially, he'd have a way to defend himself and to earn his keep. Adam, who was the father of all humans, had kept a garden; and many hermits and pious monks still did, some of them men of noble birth. According to Merlin, there had been kings in ancient times who took pleasure in such things; and monarchs in Asia still vied with one another to build and maintain gardens. Such an activity could not dishonor him. Surely it wasn't any worse than coursing game or catching rats in Arthur's stables, as he had done now and then, mostly for his own amusement, though also to help the stable boys.

Thinking this, he carried his discoveries out of the hut.

He'd find the witch. She knew more of magic and human behavior than he did. Maybe she'd be able to explain what had happened on the island. It must have a meaning, this test that he had failed and Merlin also, apparently. Maybe she would know a way to rescue Merlin. If not—he would not think so far ahead. The important thing was to go forward, remembering what his old master had taught him. ●

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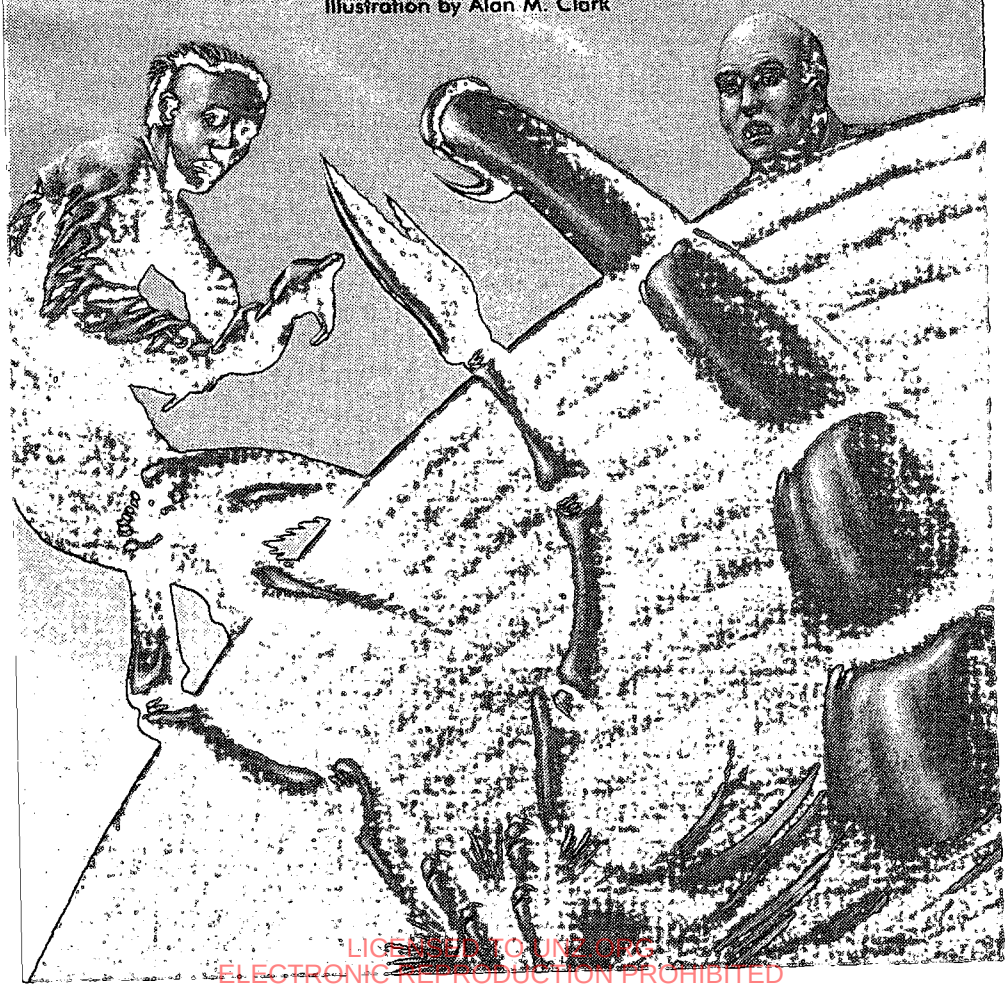
Steven Utley

A SILURIAN TALE

Embedded in Steven Utley's latest tale is a sly homage to Edmond Hamilton. Mr. Utley's most recent book, *Ghost Seas and Other Vistas*, was published by Swan last year.

Illustration by Alan M. Clark



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I'm driving with the top down, minding my own business, when a young woman appears overhead, in the sky. She's enough to make any man's heart forget to beat—supermodel lovely, long-legged, boyishly slim save for large, succulent breasts. From end to end, she's approximately the size of a Zeppelin. And she wants to have sex with me.

No, actually, she wants to sell me a new soft drink, but I'm too quick for her. I thumb up the power on my sunglasses. Her dulcet voice goes *skeeek,* she shimmers and breaks up into scintillae of light (all primary colors) and vanishes. I say, "Good riddance," and I think, Flogging's the least of what's coming to the man who invented airvertising.

Returning to the modern world—becoming part of it again—has entailed some readjustment on my part, of course, but it's not as if I'm suddenly seeing, hearing, and smelling a twenty-first-century city for the first time. Sure, I'm still getting used to the way the air tastes (worse), and there're more damn airverts than there were just a year ago, but it's hardly as if I'd never noticed that oily yellow-brown smudge hanging over the skyline until now, or wished I could avoid commercials without having to buy special equipment. And not all of the comparisons are unfavorable to the present. The world today is green, and there's nothing like greenery for softening the contours of a landscape. There were hardly any land plants where I was. It rained every day, too, and without rooted plants to hold soil in place, the cut-up terrain was almost lunar in its barrenness and angularity. Although I was never indifferent to the plant kingdom before, now I'm awed by trees, awed by flowers. I've seen their distant ancestors struggling for purchase on the inhospitable land.

I turn onto Ramrod Drive, which is in a subdivision given over to street names like Gunsight, Hollow Point, Exit Wound. The theory seems to be that members of the criminal class will be warned off. My sister Dala, her husband Tim, and their two children live in an artfully rustic stone house on a full-acre lot at the end of Ramrod. Dala appears at the front door as I pull into the driveway; I see her turn her head and call over her shoulder. I've barely had time to shut off the motor before my ten-year-old nephew Ethan and seven-year-old niece Alesha push past their mom. They come at a dead run, arrive before I can unbuckle my seat belt, dart back and forth like excited puppies, squealing, "Uncle Roge! Uncle Roge! Uncle Roge!" One Uncle Roge fewer than I got last time. Nevertheless, they practically fly into my arms as I emerge from the car, and I have to tell them not to be so shy. Alesha tries to climb onto my shoulder. Ethan accepts a hug, gives one in return, then pulls back in my embrace and tries to regain his dignity. The neighbor kids are watching, and he's just old enough for dignity to have become important to him, sometimes. Alesha wraps her arms around my neck and asks, "What did you bring us from way back when?"

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"Show you later, Little Bit."

During the year I was away, I may have missed children more than anything else. Certainly, I've missed these children.

On the patio, Tim turns his attention to building a charcoal fire. Dala's indoors, building a salad. The back yard boasts big old oaks and a fine willow. The kids and I stroll about, Alesha holding me by the index and middle fingers of my right hand, Ethan walking on my left, not touching, in case somebody is still spying on him. I hear birds singing, a dog barking, cars passing on the next street over, a squirrel telling everyone to shut up. The world of long ago was too quiet.

Alesha says, "Did you see dinosaurs?"

Before I can answer, Ethan gives her a superior look. "There weren't any dinosaurs then," he says, in a tone of voice that matches the look. To me he says, "I told her that already, but—" and shrugs, one-guy-to-another eloquent.

Alesha has to hear it from me, though, so I tell her, gently, "Your brother's right. It was before there were any dinosaurs. Before there was much of anything."

"Oh," she says, then adds, very solemnly, "that's too bad."

"Well, at least I didn't have to worry all the time about getting *eaten* by a dinosaur," and I pull my hand free of hers and assume the theropod position, torso more or less parallel to the ground, arms drawn against my chest, fingers curled into talons. A ferocious expression and a cry of "Roww-ar!" complete my transformation from uncle to giant carnivorous dinosaur. She shrieks delightedly and runs for cover among the drooping limbs of the willow. I start to charge after her but notice Ethan hanging back. "Come on," I growl, "let's go get that little mammal!"

He's visibly pained—*embarrassed,* I'm startled to realize. "I'm too old to play dinosaur any more."

"That's funny, *I'm* not," and I go roaring off in pursuit of his sister, in the expectation, the hope, at least, that he will follow.

Still, I'm thinking, Ouch. I taught him and Alesha how to play dinosaur (or, rather, we worked it out among ourselves) one afternoon when I was babysitting for Dala and Tim. I stole liberally from *The Lost World* for the scenario: they were the intrepid explorers who entered my, the Tyrant Lizard King's, jungle fastness and had to be chased out. Next, they wanted to be dinosaurs themselves—predatory ones, of course. Who would ever want to be a plant-eater? Yet, where there are predators, there must be prey, so, by virtue of my relative bulk and pea-sized brain, I was elected to the role of sauropod. In this capacity, I had to go on all fours and browse off the willow while the tyrannosaurlets set up their attack; then I got to lurch about some with them hanging off me before I fell into a twitching heap. Thereafter, I varied the theropod diet, at times im-

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personating a stegosaur (indicated by an arm held behind, with the fingers sticking stiffly upward to represent the spiky tail) or a ceratopsian (with arms extended forward to form the horns). At the swimming pool, we experimented with plesiosaurs, icthyosaurs, mosasaurs; once, I rose Kraken-like between them, all entangling tentacles, and Ethan broke character to protest. For openers, as far as he was concerned, if it wasn't Mesozoic, it wasn't squat—but if it wasn't even a *real* monster, as opposed to a mythical one, he simply wanted no part of it. He is truly Tim's son, as Alesha is Dala's daughter. I like Tim, understand, and think he and Dala complement each other very nicely, but he's an analyzer, a stockpiler of facts and solver of puzzles, while we Ovingtons have always been dreamers. Just before my departure a year ago, I made up a little song for the kids:

I have a pet, a dip-loh-doh-kus;
both his eyes are out of focus.
When I took him to the park,
he wandered off into the dark
and, being a myopic dragon,
fell upon a station wagon.
So I took him home to mend;
I'll never take him out again.

Alesha wanted to know what "myopic" meant; Ethan said, "It's pronounced dih-plod-ih-kus."

My niece screams in ecstatic terror when I catch her on the far side of the willow. Rather than eat her, I swing her onto my shoulders. Ethan has unhappily waited for us to rejoin him. He rolls his eyes when Alesha asks me, "Why didn't you go where they have dinosaurs?"

I set her on her feet next to him. "Because I couldn't."

"Nobody can," Ethan tells her. "They can only go back to the Sillian—Sil—"

"Silurian," I say, gently.

"The Silurian Period," he says, enunciating as if his life depended on it. Sih Loo Rih An.

"Sillian." Alesha giggles, says it again, giggles some more. Ethan rolls his eyes again. "Ethan read about it. He said it was boring."

He shoots her a look that somehow fails to incinerate her on the spot. I think, Well, spending a year in the Silurian is a lot like pulling a tour of duty in Greenland, only not as dangerous. The vistas are utterly different but about equally stark. The sense of isolation and the tedium are the same. I sat out my Silurian sojourn at a weather station, contributing my vital bit to paleoclimatology. I had wanted to do it and am not sorry I did

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it, but, frankly, tropical depressions haven't changed in four hundred million years.

I say, "Bor-ring is what *I* thought until the night of the giant sea scorpions."

Their eyes widen, then Ethan's skepticism kicks in, and the question in his mind is plain on his face: *How* giant. . . ?

"Would you like to hear the story?"

He nods. She considers for a moment. "Is it scary?"

"Maybe as scary as *The Wizard of Oz*. Remember how scary the witch was? Think you can handle anything that scary?"

"Is there a witch in this story?"

"No, but there're big monsters," and I lead them under the willow to a bare patch of earth, and with a stick I draw an elongate teardrop in the dirt, add lines dividing the teardrop into segments, add a pair of swept-back, oar-like appendages and then (having saved the best for last) two arms ending in pincers. "That's what these monsters look like. They live in—lived in the water, and some of them grew as big as me." I can tell from Ethan's expression that he's disappointed. "Or even bigger." How big does a critter have to be to be impressive?

Alesha says, "Do they eat people?"

"They eat anything they can get into their mouths. Tell you what, why don't I show you what I brought you instead, and you can go show Mommy and Daddy, okay?"

"Okay! Show me!"

We sit, me with my back against the willow, each of them by one of my outstretched feet. I put my hand into the left pocket of my jacket and say, "Once upon a time, long before there were people or dinosaurs, most of what is now land was at the bottom of the sea. A few rocky islands poked up out of the water, that was all. Hardly anything lived on land except right at the water's edge. Ah, but *in* the water—that was different. There were strange-looking fish that wore bony armor, and tiny, *tiny* sea creatures that formed reefs as big as mountains. There was a tribe of animals called trilobites. Can you say that?"

"Trilobites," Alesha says, perfectly.

"That's very good. I'm glad you can say it, so you can tell everybody what this is," and from my pocket I draw a disk of clear plastic. It just about fills the palm of my hand. Embedded in it are three dainty glistening blue-gray trilobites, trilobite exoskeletons, anyway, cast off during moult. They really are quite lovely. I wasn't authorized to collect any specimens for transport to the twenty-first century, but a marine biologist I knew was good enough to pick these out of the seabed litter for me. It's extremely gratifying to see Alesha's eyes and mouth imitate the letter O as I let the disk slide out of my hand, into hers.

Ethan cranes forward to see. "Are those fossils?"

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"Nope. They were fresh when they went into the plastic. Little Bit, don't I get a thank-you hug?" I do, and a thank-you kiss on the cheek as well. "Now why don't you go show Mommy and Daddy?"

"Okay," and off she rockets, clutching her piece of the Paleozoic Era.

I settle back against the tree. Ethan squirms impatiently. The sooner I get on with my story, he knows, the sooner I'll be reaching into the right pocket of my jacket.

I begin.

"When I first got to the Silurian period, I met a couple of scientists named Dr. Russell and Dr. Vrastil, who were planning a little weekend boating expedition along the coast. Dr. Russell studied fish, and Dr. Vrastil studied plants. They asked me if I'd care to go along for the ride and a change of scenery, which is a laugh, since every place in the Silurian Period looks pretty much like every other place. But I said yes, because right then we were in a place called Stinktown. It's called that because when the tide goes out, all this slimy mud and seaweed lies around in the hot sun and starts stinking to high heaven. I had a few days to kill before I could catch a ride to my weather station, but I thought the smell was likely to kill *me* if I stayed in Stinktown.

"So, early one morning, the three of us took a boat and headed out along the coast, which was all cut up into inlets. Some had never been explored. Around midday, we put into one that Russell and Vrastil found particularly interesting for some reason. I thought it was creepy, even for the Silurian Period, but I didn't want to say anything. It wasn't my party. We went in past thick floating mats of seaweed and then turned off the motor and drifted for a while. It was so quiet all you could hear was the water slapping against the hull of the boat. High rocky cliffs rose on both sides of us, and nothing grew on the shore except moss. There was a glass observation pane in the bottom of the boat, so Russell could point out all the trilobites and funny-looking fish and things, but as we went in further, the water got murky from a muddy little river that emptied into the inlet.

"After we'd set up camp, they went their separate ways to look at fish or moss. I decided to climb the cliffs enclosing the inlet and see what I could see from the top, only to find that they were too steep to climb. The only way out of the inlet was the way we'd come in.

"At sundown, we met back at camp. We were hungry and very tired, and as soon as we'd eaten supper we turned in for the night. But something awakened me after a while, a strange sound, perhaps, or something else I'd sensed in my sleep. I lay there for a minute or two, trying to figure it out, then sat up and looked around. There was enough moonlight for me to see that the others were sound asleep—and that our boat was missing!

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"I gave a yell to wake them up, and we all scrambled down in a panic to the water. There we realized that our boat wasn't actually missing, it just wasn't where we'd left it, tied up to a metal stake driven into the ground. We could just barely see the boat about a hundred feet out and figured it must've pulled loose when the tide went out. Dr. Russell said, I tied the line, I'll go get the boat, and walked right into the water. Dr. Vrastil and I could see the silvery splashes he made as he waded out and started swimming. Then, suddenly, there was a big noisy splash and a sound like he was trying to shout with his mouth full of water.

"We called out, but he didn't answer. I started to run into the water, but Dr. Vrastil stopped me. Let me go, I said, something's happened to Russell! But he said, Wait, there's a flashlight in my pack, and ran to get it.

"I didn't wait but plunged in. I'd waded out up to my knees when the beam from the flashlight stabbed through the darkness and played over the water. What I saw before me froze my blood—a moving mass of sea scorpions, all writhing bodies and snapping pincers. The creatures fed at night, and poor Dr. Russell had blundered right into their feeding ground. Now they were coming after me!

"I backed onto the shore, fast, and thought that would be enough. Dr. Vrastil kept the light on the creatures as they advanced to the water's edge. They hesitated there. And then, to my horror, they began to crawl ashore, alternating dragging and pushing themselves forward. They were gill-breathers, of course, but they could trap water in their gills.

"I dashed back to where Vrastil crouched with the flashlight. Everywhere he trained the beam, we saw dozens of the hideous monsters, converging on us. The only sounds were the clicking of their terrible claws and the scrape and crunch they made as they dragged their bellies over the ground. We could've outrun them easily if there'd been any place to run to, but we were trapped by the cliffs, and we had no weapons. I don't mind telling you I was scared, and Vrastil was making little whimpering cries.

"But millions of years of evolution have given us brains, and at last I used mine. I had an inspired thought and suddenly dashed the flashlight from Vrastil's hand. It struck the ground, I heard glass break, and the light went out. Vrastil screamed and clutched at me in terror. It was all I could do to make him be quiet and listen to me. The light, I told him, it's the light! The light attracts them! Sure enough, the monsters began to mill around uncertainly in the moonlight.

"But if they no longer had the beam of light to guide them to us, they still had the idea of prey fixed in their primitive little minds, and with so many of the creatures blindly groping about, the chance still existed that they'd overrun us. It seemed like hours before their gills began to dry out and, one or two at a time, they slipped back into the water. Even then, I didn't dare relax my vigilance, knowing that they could come ashore at

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will. Nights are short in the Silurian Period, because the Earth rotates faster, but that night was the longest of my life."

The curtain of willow branches parts, and Dala joins us. "Oh, don't stop," she says, crossing her arms, "go on. There is more, isn't there?"

"You bet, absolutely." I'm unabashed. "Well, there's a little more."

"Well, tell," she says, "tell."

"Ahem. When the sun finally rose, we saw no sign of the monsters or Dr. Russell. They must've torn him completely to pieces. Our boat, however, had come to rest against the shore during the night. I told Dr. Vrastil that we were going to be okay, but I don't think he heard me. The experience had been too much for him. He could only gibber and drool—his mind had snapped. But I managed to get him into the boat. I was about to start the motor when something hit the side of the boat. Bump, bump-bump, bump, like that. Behind me, Vrastil suddenly screamed. I whirled about, and there, pulling itself up over the side of the boat, was a sea scorpion as big as a bear! It grabbed at me—" I dart my hand at Ethan and make a clutching gesture, and he recoils sharply "—but I dodged, picked up the boat hook, and knocked the claw aside. I tried to stab the creature, but the point of the boat hook only glanced off its armored skin. As the monster reared back from the blow, however, I saw that it was off balance, so I drove the boat hook hard against its underside. It clutched frantically at the air as it started to topple, and then, with a roar of frustration, it fell back into the water. I didn't wait to see if it would try again but gunned the motor and got us out of there as fast as the boat would take us. A few hours later, poor mad Dr. Vrastil and I were safely back in Stinktown, but nobody there believed my story—"

"Imagine that," Dala says. I recognize the look on her face, the tone of her voice.

"Mah-um," says Ethan, "shh."

"Nobody believed my story until I showed them what I'd found in the bottom of the boat." I put my hand into the right pocket of my jacket and pull out an object encased in clear polyurethane. It looks somewhat like a crab claw but isn't. It's slightly longer than my hand, whitish with blue mottling, and impressively spiky. "The boat hook caught it at just the right angle," I say as I present it to Ethan, who makes a soft vowel sound as he accepts it.

While he sits turning it over and over in his fingers, Dala says, "I came to tell you it's eats in just five short minutes."

"Where's Little Bit?"

"I've got to go round her up, too. She ran next door to show her friend Amy the trilobites you gave her. Ethan, go wash."

Still unable to see anything but the claw, he gets to his feet and disappears through the willow branches.

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I stand and dust off my butt. Dala says, dryly, "Thank you for not telling Alesha that story."

"Well, I'd've toned it down considerably for her. She'd've gotten the Disney version. Ethan got the classic pulp version. Three men go out. One gets eaten by things. One goes mad. And I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

She glances down, notices my drawing in the dirt.

"That's what the monsters looked like," I say.

She laughs softly and shakes her head. "Tell the truth now, did you actually see anything remotely resembling this the whole time you were back there?"

"Sure. Saw one from a glass-bottomed boat."

"Only one?"

"They're solitary creatures. According to my friend Russell, they mostly root around in the mud for worms and stuff."

"Ah! So there is a Dr. Russell. And did things eat him?"

"Yes, there is, and no, they didn't." We move out from under the willow and walk slowly toward the house. Ethan is showing the claw to Tim, who's trying to look at it and take chicken off the grill at the same time. "There's a Dr. Vrastil, too, who hasn't been driven mad by terror."

"And that evil-looking animal part you gave Ethan?"

"Part of an exoskeleton shed by a large, indeed evil-looking animal whose path never crossed mine, I'm happy to say. Russell found it and Alesha's trilobites for me."

"Let's hope Ethan never finds out his favorite uncle's thrilling prehistoric adventure is just a tissue of lies."

I stop walking, and she has to wait as I recite:

"Here about the beach I wander,
Nourishing a youth sublime
With the fairy tales of science,
And the long results of time."

"Is that one of yours?"

"Alfred Tennyson. Oh, Dala, Ethan doesn't really believe my story any more than Little Bit believes I'm going to gobble her up when I turn into a dinosaur and chase her. She screams when I catch her, but she knows it's make-believe. And it's not like I ever had to *explain* make-believe to these kids. So give Ethan some credit. He's already smarter than you and me put together."

"Ha," Dala says. "You wreck the bell curve."

"Ha yourself."

"Still, aren't you worried he's going to resent you for telling him a string of whoppers?"

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"Not if they're entertaining whoppers. He'll save his resentment for the kind of lies that're meant to cheat him. Politicians' lies, used-car salesmen's lies. The kind of lie that says drinking such and such a brand of soft drink will not only get you laid, but laid by the kind of slim, leggy, busty gal who doesn't occur in nature. Look. He knows you can't leap out a window and fly away, but he still likes Peter Pan and Superman. He knows outer space is a vacuum, and sound doesn't travel in a vacuum—he figured this out over a year ago—but he didn't stop watching those sci-fi shows where you can hear explosions in space. An hour from now, he'll turn to me all of a sudden and say, Hey, wait a minute, how can an animal that breathes through gills *roar?*"

"And your answer will be—?"

"My answer will be, Like this—roww-ar!"

The five of us seat ourselves at the table and hold hands as Tim says grace. I look up from my barbecued chicken and across the table at Alesha. "I'm not sure which I'd rather have for dinner, chicken or—" I draw my arms against my chest, curl my fingers into claws, growl "—Little Bit!"

Over the rim of her glass, Alesha says, "Not at the table, Uncle Roge," and Dala laughs. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's,* 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130.

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Jack McDevitt

TIME TRAVELERS NEVER DIE

The author retired in June 1995 after twenty years with the Customs Service—the last eight of which were spent as a motivational trainer—and immediately began writing full time. He says that he is absolutely delighted with the change of pace. Mr. McDevitt's most recent novel, *Ancient Shores,* is just out from HarperPrism, and he is well into the next, *Eternity Road.* His latest story for *Asimov's* placed second in the 1994 UPC International Contest for Best Novella. It will also be featured in his short story collection, *Standard Candles,* due out from Tachyon Publications later this spring.

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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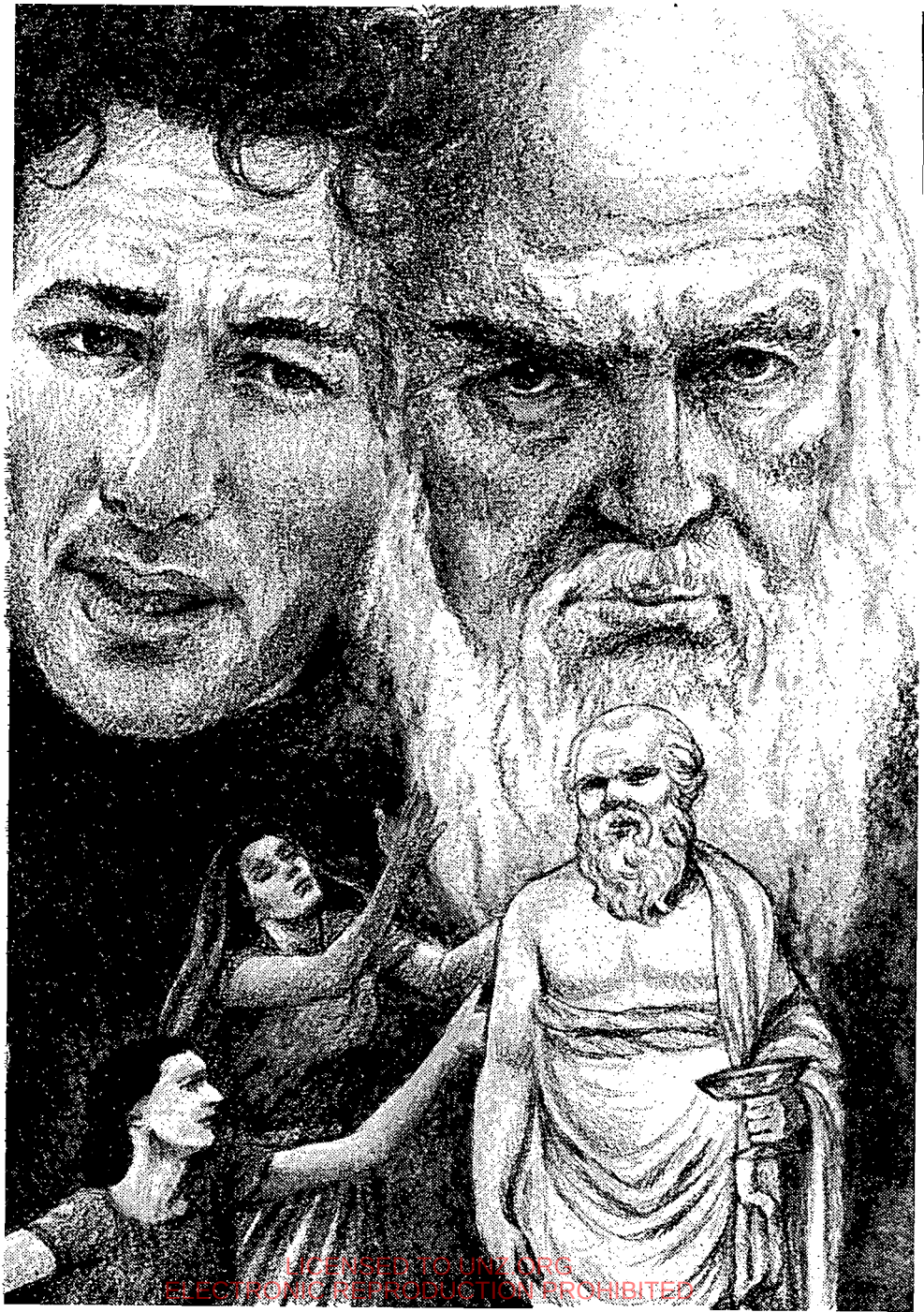

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Thursday, November 24. Shortly before noon.

We buried him on a cold, gray morning, threatening snow. The mourners were few, easily constraining their grief for a man who had traditionally kept his acquaintances at a distance. I watched the preacher, white-haired, feeble, himself near the end, and I wondered what he was thinking as the wind rattled the pages of his prayer book.

Ashes to ashes—

I stood with hands thrust into my coat pockets, near tears. Look: I'm not ashamed to admit it. Shel was odd, vindictive, unpredictable, selfish. He didn't have a lot of friends. Didn't deserve a lot of friends. But I *loved* him. I've never known anyone like him.

—In sure and certain hope—

I wasn't all that confident about the resurrection, but I knew that Adrian Shelborne would indeed walk the earth again. Even if only briefly. I knew, for example, that he and I would stand on an Arizona hilltop on a fresh spring morning late in the twenty-first century, and watch silver vehicles rise into the sky on the first leg of the voyage to Centaurus. And we would be present at the assassination of Elaine Culpepper, a name unknown now, but which would in time be inextricably linked with the collapse of the North American Republic. Time travelers never really die, he was fond of saying. We've been too far downstream. You and I will live for a very long time.

The preacher finished, closed his book, and raised his hand to bless the polished orchid-colored coffin. The wind blew, and the air was heavy with the approaching storm. The mourners, anxious to be away, bent their heads and walked past, laying lilies on the coffin. When it was done, they lingered briefly, murmuring to each other. Helen Suchenko stood off to one side, looking lost. Lover with no formal standing. Known to the family but not particularly liked, mostly because they disapproved of Shel himself. She dabbed jerkily at her eyes and kept her gaze riveted on the gray stone which carried his name and dates.

She was fair-haired, with eyes the color of seawater, and a quiet, introspective manner that might easily have misled those who did not know her well.

"I can't believe it," she said.

I had introduced him to Helen, fool that I am. She and I had been members of the Devil's Disciples, a group of George Bernard Shaw devotees. She was an MD, just out of medical school when she first showed up for a field trip to see *Arms and the Man*. It was love at first sight, but I was slow to show my feelings. And while I was debating how best to make my approach, Shel walked off with her. He even asked whether I was interested, and I, sensing I had already lost, salvaged my pride and told him of course not. After that it was over.

He never knew. He used to talk about her a lot when we were up-

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stream. How he was going to share the great secret with her, and take her to Victorian London. Or St. Petersburg before the first war. But it never happened. It was always something he was going to do later.

She was trembling. He really *was* gone. And I now had a clear field with her. That indecent thought kept surfacing. I was reasonably sure she had always been drawn to me, too, just as she was to Shel, and I suspected that I might have carried the day with her had I pressed my case. But honor was mixed up in it somewhere, and I'd kept my distance.

Her cheeks were wet.

"I'll miss him, too," I said.

"I loved him, Dave."

"I know."

He had died when his townhouse burned down almost two weeks before. He'd been asleep upstairs and had never got out of bed. The explanation seemed to be that the fire had sucked the oxygen out of the house and suffocated him before he ever realized what was happening. Okay, I didn't believe it either, but that was what we were hearing.

"It'll be all right," I said.

She tried to laugh, but the sound had an edge to it. "Our last conversation was so goofy. I wish I'd known—" Tears leaked out of her eyes. She stopped, tried to catch her breath. "I would have liked," she said, when she'd regained a degree of control, "to have been able to say goodbye."

"I know." I began to guide her toward my Porsche. "Why don't you let me take you home?"

"Thank you," she said, backing off. "I'll be okay." Her car was parked near a stone angel.

Edmond Halverson, head of the art department at the university, drew abreast of us, nodded to me, tipped his hat to her, and whispered his regrets. We mumbled something back and he walked on.

She swallowed, and smiled. "When you get a chance, Dave, give me a call."

I watched her get into her car and drive away. She had known so much about Adrian Shelborne. And so little.

He had traveled in time, and of all persons now alive, only I knew. He had brought me in, he'd said, because he needed my language skills. But I believe it was more than that. He wanted someone to share the victory with, someone to help him celebrate. Over the years, he'd mastered classical Greek, and Castilian, and Renaissance Italian. And he'd gone on, acquiring enough Latin, Russian, French, and German to get by on his own. But we continued to travel together. And it became the hardest thing in my life to refrain from telling people I had once talked aerodynamics with Leonardo.

I watched his brother Jerry duck his head to get into his limo. Interested only in sports and women, Shel had said of him. And making mon-

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ey. *If I'd told him about the Watch,* he'd said, *and offered to take him along, he'd have asked to see a Super Bowl.*

Shel had discovered the principles of time travel while looking into quantum gravity. He'd explained any number of times how the Watches worked, but I never understood any of it. Not then, and not now. "But why all the secrecy?" I'd asked him. "Why not take credit? It's the discovery of the ages." We'd laughed at the new shade of meaning to the old phrase.

"Because it's dangerous," he'd said, peering over the top of his glasses, not at me, but at something in the distance. "Time travel should not be possible in a rational universe." He'd shaken his head, and his unruly black hair had fallen into his eyes. He was only thirty-eight at the time of his funeral. "I saw from the first *why* it was theoretically possible," he'd said. "But I thought I was missing something, some detail that would intervene to prevent the actual construction of a device. And yet there it is." And he'd glanced down at the Watch strapped to his left wrist. He worried about Causality, the simple flow of cause and effect. "A time machine breaks it all down," he said. "It makes me wonder what kind of universe we live in."

I thought we should forget the philosophy and tell the world. Let other people worry about the details. When I pressed him, he'd talked about teams from the Mossad going back to drag Hitler out of 1935, or Middle Eastern terrorists hunting down Thomas Jefferson. "It leads to utter chaos," he'd said. "Either time travel should be prohibited, like exceeding the speed of light, or the intelligence to achieve it should be prohibited."

We used to retreat sometimes to a tower on a rocky reef somewhere downstream. No one lives there, and there is only ocean in all directions. I don't know how he found it, or who built it, or what that world is like. Nor do I believe *he* did. We enjoyed the mystery of the place. The moon is bigger, and the tides are loud. We'd hauled a generator out there, and a refrigerator, and a lot of furniture. We used to sit in front of a wall-length transparent panel, sipping beer, watching the ocean, and talking about God, history, and women.

They were good days.

Eventually, he had said, I will bring Helen here.

The wind blew, the mourners dwindled and were gone, and the coffin waited on broad straps for the workmen who would lower it into the ground.

Damn. I would miss him.

Gone now. He and his Watches. And temporal logic apparently none the worse.

Oh, I still had a working unit in my desk, but I knew I would not use it again. I did not have his passion for time travel. Leave well enough alone. That's always been my motto.

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On the way home, I turned on the radio. It was an ordinary day. Peace talks were breaking down in Africa. Another congressman was accused of diverting campaign funds. Assaults against spouses were still rising. And in Los Angeles there was a curious conclusion to an expressway pile-up: two people, a man and a woman, had broken into a wrecked vehicle and kidnapped the driver, who was believed to be either dead or seriously injured. They had apparently run off with him.

Only in California.

Shel had been compulsively secretive. Not only about time travel, but about everything. The mask was always up and you never really knew what he was feeling. He used to drive Helen crazy when we went out to dinner because she had to wait until the server arrived to find out what he was going to order. When he was at the university, his department could never get a detailed syllabus out of him. And I was present when his own accountant complained that he was holding back information.

He used to be fond of saying knowledge is power, and I think that was what made him feel successful, that he knew things other people didn't. Something must have happened to him when he was a kid to leave him so in need of artificial support. It was probably the same characteristic that had turned him into the all-time great camp follower. I don't know what the proper use for a time machine should be. We used it to make money. But mostly we used it to argue theology with Thomas Aquinas, to talk with Isaac Newton about gravity, to watch Thomas Huxley take on Bishop Wilberforce. For us, it had been almost an entertainment medium. It seemed to me that we should have done *more* with it.

Don't ask me what. Maybe track down Michelangelo's lost statue of *Hermes*. Shel had shown interest in the project, and we had even stopped by his workshop to admire the piece shortly before its completion. The artist was about twenty years old at the time. And the *Hermes* was magnificent. I would have killed to own it.

Actually, I had all kinds of souvenirs: coins that a young Julius Caesar had lost to Shel over draughts, a program from the opening night of *The Barber of Seville*, a quill once used by Benjamin Franklin. And photos. We had whole albums full of Alexander and Marcus Aurelius and the sails of the *Santa Maria* coming over the horizon. But they all looked like scenes from old movies. Except that the actors didn't look as good as you'd expect. When I pressed Shel for a point to all the activity, he said, what more could there be than an evening before the fire with Al Einstein? (We had got to a fairly intimate relationship with him, during the days when he was still working for the Swiss patent office.)

There were times when I knew he wanted to tell Helen what we were doing, and bring her along. But some tripwire always brought him up short, and he'd turn to me with that maddeningly innocuous smile as if

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to say, you and I have a secret and we had best keep it that way for now. Helen caught it, knew there was something going on. But she was too smart to try to break it open.

We went out fairly regularly, the three of us, and my true love of the month, whoever that might be. My date was seldom the same twice because she always figured out that Helen had me locked up. Helen knew that too, of course. But Shel didn't. I don't think it ever occurred to him that his old friend would have considered for a moment moving in on the woman he professed (although not too loudly) to love. There were moments when we'd be left alone at the table, Helen and I, usually while Shel was dancing with my date. And the air would grow thick with tension. Neither of us ever said anything directly, but sometimes our gaze touched, and her eyes grew very big and she'd get a kind of forlorn look.

Helen was a frustrated actress who still enjoyed the theater. After about a year, she abandoned the Devil's Disciples, explaining that she simply did not have time for it anymore. But Shel understood her passion and indulged it where he could. Whenever there was a revival, we all went. Inevitably, while we watched Shaw's trapped characters careen toward their destinies, Shel would find an opportunity to tell me he was going to take her back to meet the great playwright.

I used to promise myself to stop socializing with her, to find an excuse, because it hurt so much to sit in the awful glare of her passion for him. But if I had done that, I wouldn't have seen her at all. At night, when the evening was over and we were breaking up, she always kissed me, sometimes lightly on the cheek, sometimes a quick hit-and-run full on the lips. And once or twice, when she'd drunk a little too much and her control had slipped, she'd put some serious effort into it.

2.

Thursday, November 24. Noon.

The storm picked up while I drove home, reminiscing, feeling sorry for myself. I already missed his voice, his sardonic view of the world, his amused cynicism. Together, we had seen power misused and abused all through the centuries, up close, sometimes with calculation, more often out of ignorance. Our shared experiences, certainly unique in the history of the planet, had forged a bond between us. The dissolution of that bond, I knew, was going to be a long, painful process.

He'd done all the research in his basement laboratory, had built the first working model of his Temporal Occluding Transport System (which, in a flash back to his bureaucratic days with the National Science Foundation, he called TOTS) in a space between his furnace and a wall filled with filing cabinets. The prototype had been a big, near-room-sized

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chamber. But the bulk of the device had dwindled as its capabilities increased. Eventually, it had shrunk to the size of a watch. It was powered by a cell clipped to the belt or carried in a pocket. I still had one of the power packs at the house.

I would have to decide what to do with our wardrobe. It was located in a second floor bedroom that had served as an anteroom to the ages. A big walk-in closet overflowed with costumes, and shelves were jammed with books on culture and language for every period that we'd visited, or intended to visit.

But if my time-traveling days were over, I had made enough money from the enterprise that I would never have to work again—if I chose not to. The money had come from having access to next week's newspapers. We'd debated the morality of taking personal advantage of our capabilities, but I don't think the issue was ever in doubt. We won a small fortune at various race tracks, and continued to prosper until two gentlemen dropped by Shel's place one afternoon and told him that they were not sure what was behind his winning streak, but that if it continued, they would break his knees. They must have known enough about us to understand it wouldn't be necessary to repeat the message to me.

We considered switching into commodities. But neither of us understood much about them, so we took our next plunge in the stock market. "It's got to be illegal," said Shel. And I'd laughed. "How could it be?" I asked him. "There are no laws against time travel." "Insider trading," he suggested.

Whatever. We justified our actions because gold was the commodity of choice upstream. It was research money, and we told each other it was for the good of mankind, although neither of us could quite explain how that was so. Gold was the one item that opened all doors, no matter what age you were in, no matter what road you traveled. If I learned anything during my years as Shel's interpreter and faithful Indian companion, it was that people will do anything for gold.

While I took a vaguely smug view of human greed, I put enough aside to buy a small estate in Exeter, and retired from the classroom to a life of books and contemplation. And travel through the dimensions.

Now that it was over, I expected to find it increasingly difficult to keep the secret. I had learned too much. I wanted to tell people what I'd done. Who I'd talked to. *So we were sitting over doughnuts and coffee on St. Helena, and I said to Napoleon—*

There was a thin layer of snow on the ground when I got home. Ray White, a retired tennis player who lives alone on the other side of Carmichael Drive, was out walking. He waved me down to tell me how sorry he was to hear about Shel's death. I thanked him and pulled into the driveway. A black car that I didn't recognize was parked in front of the house. Two people, a man and a woman, were sitting inside. They

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opened their doors and got out as I drifted to a stop. I turned off the engine without putting the car away.

The woman was taller, and more substantial, than the man. She held out a set of credentials. "Dr. Dryden?" she said. "I'm Sgt. Lake, Carroll County Police." She smiled, an expressionless mechanical gesture lacking any warmth. "This is Sgt. Howard. Could we have a few minutes of your time?"

Her voice was low key. She would have been attractive had she been a trifle less official. She was in her late thirties, with cold dark eyes and a cynical expression that looked considerably older than she was.

"Sure," I said, wondering what it was about.

Sgt. Howard made no secret of the fact that he was bored. His eyes glided over me, and he dismissed me as a lowlife whose only conceivable interest to him might lie in my criminal past.

We stepped up onto the deck and went in through the sliding glass panels. Lake sat down on the sofa, while Howard undid a lumpy gray scarf, and took to wandering around the room, inspecting books, prints, stereo, whatever. I offered coffee.

"No, thanks," said Lake. Howard just looked as if I hadn't meant him. Lake crossed her legs. "I wanted first to offer my condolences on the death of Dr. Shelborne. I understand he was a close friend of yours?"

"That's correct," I said. "We've known each other for a long time."

She nodded, produced a leather-bound notebook, opened it, and wrote something down. "Did you have a professional relationship?" she asked.

"No," I said slowly. "We were just friends."

"I understand." She paused. "Dr. Dryden," she said, "I'm sorry to tell you this: Dr. Shelborne was murdered."

My first reaction was simply to disbelieve the statement. "You're not serious," I said.

"I never joke, Doctor. We believe someone attacked the victim in bed, struck him hard enough to fracture his skull, and set fire to the house."

Behind me, the floor creaked. Howard was moving around. "I don't believe it," I said.

Her eyes never left me. "The fire happened between 2:15 and 2:30 A.M., on the twelfth. Friday night, Saturday morning. I wonder if you'd mind telling me where you were at that time?"

"At home in bed," I said. There had been rumors that the fire was deliberately set, but I hadn't taken any of it seriously. "Asleep," I added unnecessarily. "I thought lightning hit the place?"

"No. There's really no question that it was arson."

"Hard to believe," I said.

"Why?"

"Nobody would want to kill Shel. He had no enemies. At least, none that I know of."

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I was beginning to feel guilty. Authority figures always make me feel guilty. "You can't think of *anyone* who'd want him dead?"

"No," I said. But he had a lot of money. And there were relatives.

She looked down at her notebook. "Do you know if he kept any jewelry in the house?"

"No. He didn't wear jewelry. As far as I know, there was nothing like that around."

"How about cash?"

"I don't know." I started thinking about the gold coins that we always took with us when we went upstream. A stack of them had been locked in a desk drawer. (I had some of them upstairs in the wardrobe.) Could anyone have known about them? I considered mentioning them, but decided it would be prudent to keep quiet, since I couldn't explain how they were used. And it would make no sense that I knew about a lot of gold coins in his desk and had never asked about them. "Do you think it was burglars?" I said.

Her eyes wandered to one of the bookcases. It was filled with biographies and histories of the Renaissance. My favorite period. The eyes were black pools that seemed to be waiting for something to happen. "That's possible, I suppose." She canted her head to read a title. It was Ledesma's biography of Cervantes, in the original Spanish. "Although burglars don't usually burn the house down." Howard had got tired poking around, so he circled back and lowered himself into a chair. "Dr. Dryden," she continued, "is there anyone who can substantiate the fact that you were here asleep on the morning of the twelfth?"

"No," I said. "I was alone." The question surprised me. "You don't think *I* did it, do you?"

"We don't really think *anybody* did it, yet."

Howard caught her attention and directed it toward the wall. There was a photograph of the three of us, Shel and Helen and me, gathered around a table at the Beach Club. A mustard-colored umbrella shielded the table, and we were laughing and holding tall, cool drinks. She studied it, and turned back to me. "What exactly," she said, "is your relationship with Dr. Suchenko?"

I swallowed, and felt the color draining out of my face. *I love her. I've loved her from the moment I met her.* "We're friends," I said.

"Is that all?" I caught a hint of a smile. But nobody knew. I had kept my distance all this time. I'd told no one. Even Helen didn't know. Well, she knew, but neither of us had ever admitted to it.

"Yes," I said. "That's all."

She glanced around the room. "Nice house."

It was. I had treated myself pretty well, installing leather furniture and thick pile carpets and a stow-away bar and some original art. "Not bad for a teacher," she added.

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"I don't teach anymore."

She closed her book. "So I understand."

I knew what was in her mind. "I did pretty well on the stock market," I said. I must have sounded defensive.

"As did Dr. Shelborne."

"Yes," I said. "That's so."

"Same investments?"

Yes, they were the same. With only slight variations, we'd parlayed the same companies into our respective fortunes. "By and large, yes," I said. "We did our research together. An investment club, you might say."

Her eyes lingered on me a moment too long. She began to button her jacket. "Well, I think that'll do it, Dr. Dryden," she said.

I was still numb with the idea that someone might have murdered Shelborne. He had never flaunted his money, had never even moved out of that jerkwater townhouse over in River Park. But someone had found out. And they'd robbed him. Possibly he'd come home and they were already in the house. He might even have been upstream. Damn, what a jolt that would have been: return from an evening in Babylon and get attacked by burglars.

I opened the sliding door for them. "You will be in the area if we need you?" Lake asked. I assured her I would be, and that I would do whatever I could to help find Shel's killer. I watched them drive away and went back inside and locked the door. It had been painful enough believing that Shel had died through some arbitrary act of nature. But that a thug who had nothing whatever to contribute to the species would dare to take his life filled me with rage.

I poured a brandy and stared out the window. The snow was coming harder now. I couldn't believe anyone would think for a moment that *I* could be capable of such an act. It chilled me.

In back somewhere, something moved. It might have been a branch scraping against the side of the house, but it sounded *inside.*

Snow fell steadily against the windows.

It came again. A floor board, maybe. Not much more than a whisper.

I took down a golf club, went out into the hallway, looked up the staircase and along the upper level. Glanced toward the kitchen.

Wood creaked.

Upstairs.

I started up, ascending as quietly as I could, and got about halfway when a movement at the door to the middle bedroom caught my attention. The wardrobe.

One of the curious phenomena associated with sudden and unexpected death is our inability to accept it when it strikes those close to us. We always imagine that the person we've lost is in the kitchen, or in the next room, and that it requires only that we call his name in the customary

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way to have him reappear in the customary place. I felt that way about Shel. We had lunched with Cervantes and ridden with Washington and lived a thousand other miracles. And when it was over, we always came back through the wardrobe and out onto the landing.

He came out now.

Shel stood up there, watching me.

I froze.

"Hello, Dave," he said.

I hung on to the banister, and the stairs felt slippery. "Shel," I said shakily, "is that *you?*"

He smiled. The old, crooked grin that I had thought not to see again. Some part of me that was too slow-witted to get flustered started flicking through explanations. Someone else had died in the fire. It was a dream. Shel had a twin.

"Yes," he said. "It's me. Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry. I know this must be a shock." He moved toward me, along the top of the landing. I'm not sure what I was feeling. There was a rush of emotions, of joy, of anger, even of fear. He came down a few stairs, took my shoulders, and steadied me. His hands were solid, his smile very real, and my heart sank. Helen's image rose before me.

"I don't understand," I said.

Adrian Shelborne was tall and graceful, blessed with the clean-cut features of a romantic hero. His eyes were bright and sad. We slid down into sitting positions. "It's been a strange morning," he said.

"You're supposed to be dead."

He took a deep breath. "I know. I do believe I *am*, David."

Suddenly it was clear. "You're *downstream*."

"Yes," he said. "I'm downstream." He drew his legs up in a gesture that looked defensive. "You sure you're okay?"

"I've spent two weeks trying to get used to this. That you were gone—"

"It's true." He spaced the words, not able to accept it himself.

"When you go back—"

"—The house will burn, and I will be in it."

For a long time neither of us spoke. "Don't do it," I said at last. "Stay here."

"I can't *stay here*," he said. "What does that do to the time stream?"

Damn the time stream. I was thinking how candlelight filled Helen's eyes, how she and Shel had walked to the car together at the end of an evening, the press of her lips still vibrant against my cheek.

"Maybe you're right," I said.

"Of course I am. They just buried me, Dave. They found me in my bed. Did you know I didn't even get out of my bed?"

"Yes," I said. "I heard that."

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"I don't believe it." He was pale, and I noticed his eyes were red.

My first ride with him had been to Gettysburg to listen to Lincoln. Afterward, when I was still trying to come to terms with the fact that I had really been there, he talked about having dinner with Caesar and drinking with Voltaire.

He must have felt my company to be of value, because he invited me to go a second time. I'd wondered where we were headed, expecting historic significance, but we went only to 1978 New Haven. We were riding a large misshapen brown chamber then, a thing that looked like a hot water tank. "I want you to meet someone," he said, as we emerged into streets filled with odd-looking cars. Her name was Martha, and she had been Shel's fiancée. Six hours after our arrival she would fall asleep at the wheel of her Ford. And Shel's life would change forever. "She and I had dinner last night at The Mug," he told me while we waited for her to come out of the telephone company building where she worked. "I never saw her again."

It was 5:00 P.M., and the first rush out the door was beginning.

"What are you going to do?" I'd asked.

He was in a state of extreme nervous agitation. "Talk to her."

I laughed. "Are you serious? What are you going to tell her?"

"I'll be careful," he said. Don't want to create a paradox. "I just want to see her again."

A light rain had begun. People started pouring out through the revolving doors. They looked up at the dark clouds, grimaced, and scattered to cars and buses, holding newspapers over their heads.

And then Martha came out.

I knew her immediately, because Shel stiffened and caught his breath. She paused to exchange a few words with another young woman. The rain intensified.

She was twenty years old and full of vitality and good humor. There was something of the tomboy about her, just giving way to a lush golden beauty. Her hair was shoulder-length and swung easily with every move. (I thought I saw much of Helen in her, in her eyes, in the set of her mouth, in her animation.) She was standing back under the building overhang, protected from the storm. She waved goodbye to the friend, and prepared to run for her car. But her gaze fell on us, on Shel. Her brow furrowed and she looked at us uncertainly.

Shel took a step forward.

I discovered I was holding his arm. Holding him back. A gust of wind blew loose dust and paper through the air. "Don't," I said.

"I know."

She shook her head as if she recognized a mistake, and hurried away. We watched her disappear around the corner out onto the parking lot.

We had talked about that incident many times, what might have hap-

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pened had he intervened. We used to sit in the tower at the end of time, and he'd talk about feeling guilty because he had not prevented her death. "Maybe we can't change anything. But I feel as if I should have tried."

Now, starting carefully downstairs, he seemed frail. Disoriented. "They think you were murdered," I said.

"I know. I heard the conversation." In the living room he fell into an armchair.

My stomach was churning and I knew I wasn't thinking clearly. "What happened? How did you find out about the funeral?"

He didn't answer right away. "I was doing some research downstream," he said finally, "in the Trenton Library. In the reference section. I was looking at biographies, so I could plan future flights. You know how I work."

"Yes," I said.

"And I did something I knew was a mistake. Knew it while I was doing it. But I went ahead anyhow."

"You looked up your own biography."

"I couldn't help it." He massaged his jaw. "It's a terrible thing," he said, "to have the story of your entire life lying at your elbow. Unopened. Dave, I walked away from it twice and came back both times." He smiled weakly. "I will be remembered for my work in quantum transversals."

"This is what comes of traveling alone." I was irritated. "I told you we should never do that."

"It's done," he said. "Listen, if I hadn't looked, I'd be dead now."

I broke out a bottle of burgundy, filled two glasses and we drank it off and I filled them again. "What are you going to do?"

He shook his head. "*It's waiting for me back there.* I don't know *what* to do." His breathing was loud. Snow was piling up on the windows.

"The papers are predicting four inches," I said.

He nodded, as if it mattered. "The biography also says I was murdered. It didn't say by whom."

"It must have been burglars."

"At least," he said, "I'm warned. Maybe I should take a gun back with me."

"Maybe."

"What happens if I change it?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Well." He took a deep breath and tried to smile. "Anyway, I thought you'd want to know I'm okay." He snickered at that. His own joke.

I kept thinking about Helen. "Don't go back at all," I said. "With or without a gun."

"I'm not sure that's an option."

"It sure as hell is."

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"At some point," he said, "for one reason or another, I went home." He was staring at the burgundy. He hadn't touched the second glass. "My God, Dave, I'm scared. I've never thought of myself as a coward, but I'm afraid to face this."

I just sat.

"It's knowing the way of it," he said. "That's what tears my heart out."

I got up and looked at the storm.

"Stay here for now," I said. "There's no hurry."

He shook his head. "I just don't think the decision's in my hands." For a long time, neither of us spoke. Finally, he seemed to make up his mind. "I've got a few places to go. People to talk to. Then, when I've done what I need to do, I'll think about all this."

"Good."

He picked up the glass, drained it, wiped his lips, and drifted back against the sofa. "Let me ask you something: are they sure it's me?"

"I understand the body was burned beyond recognition," I said.

"There's something to think about. It could be anyone. And even if it *is* me, it might be a Schrödinger situation. As long as no one knows for certain, it might not matter."

"The police probably know. I assume they checked your dental records."

His brows drew together. "I suppose they do that sort of thing automatically. Do me a favor, though, and make sure they have a proper identification." He got up, wandered around the room, touching things, the books, the bust of Churchill, the P.C. He paused in front of the picture from the Beach Club. "I keep thinking how much it means to be alive. You know, Dave, I saw people out there today I haven't seen in years."

The room became very still.

He played with his glass. It was an expensive piece, chiseled, and he peered at its facets.

"I think you need to tell her," I said gently.

His expression clouded. "I know." He drew the words out. "I'll talk to her. When the time is right."

"Be careful," I said. "She isn't going to expect to see you."

3.

Friday, November 25. Mid-morning.

The critical question was whether we had in fact buried Adrian Shelborne, or whether there was a possibility of mistaken identity. We talked through the night. But neither of us knew anything about police procedure in such matters, so I said I would look into it.

I started with Jerry Shelborne, who could hardly have been less like

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his brother. There was a mild physical resemblance between the two, although Jerry had allowed the roast beef to pile up a little too much. He was a corporate lawyer who believed Shel had shuffled aimlessly through life, puttering away with notions that had no reality in the everyday world in which real people live. Even his brother's sudden wealth had not changed his opinion.

"I shouldn't speak ill of the dead," he told me that morning. "He was a decent man, had a lot of talent, but he never really made his life count for anything." Jerry sat behind a polished teak desk, guarded by an India rubber plant leaning toward a sun-filled window. The furniture was dark-stained, leather-padded, highly polished. Plaques covered the walls, appreciations from civic groups, awards from major corporations, various licenses and testaments. Photos of his two children were prominently displayed on the desk, a boy in a Little League uniform, a girl nuzzling a horse. His wife, who had left him years earlier, was missing.

"Actually," I said, "I thought he did pretty well."

"I don't mean money," he said. (I hadn't been thinking of money.) "But it seems to me a man has an obligation to live in his community. To make a contribution to it." He leaned back expansively and thrust a satisfied finger into a vest pocket. " 'To whom much is given,' " he said, " 'much shall be expected.' "

"I suppose," I said. "Anyway, I wanted to extend my sympathy."

"Thank you." Jerry rose, signaling that the interview was over.

We walked slowly toward the paneled door. "You know," I said, "this experience has a little bit of *déjà vu* about it."

He squinted at me. He didn't like me, and wasn't going to be bothered concealing it. "How do you mean?" he asked.

"There was a language teacher at Princeton, where I got my doctorate. Same thing happened to him. He lived alone and one night a gas main let go and blew up the whole house. They buried him, and then found out it wasn't him at all. He'd gone on an unannounced holiday to Vermont, and turned his place over to a friend. They didn't realize until several days after the funeral when he came home. Unsettled everybody."

Jerry shook his head, amused at the colossal stupidity loose in the world. "Unfortunately," he said, "there's not much chance of that here. They tell me the dental records were dead on."

I probably shouldn't have tried to see how Helen was doing, because my own emotions were still churning. But I called her from a drug store and she said yes, how about lunch? We met at an Applebee's in the Garden Square Mall.

She looked worn out. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she showed a tendency to lose the thread of conversation. She and Shel had made no formal commitment, as far as I knew. But she had certainly believed they

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had a future together. Come what may. But Shel had been evasive. And there had been occasions when, discouraged that she got so little of his time, she'd opened up to me. I don't know if anything else in my life had ever been quite as painful as sitting with her, listening to her describe her frustration, watching the occasional tear roll down her cheek. She trusted me, absolutely.

"Are you all right?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said. "How about you?"

The talk was full of regrets, things not said, acts undone. The subject of the police suspicions came up, and we found it hard to subscribe to the burglar theory. "What kind of intruder," I asked, "kills a sleeping man, and then sets his house on fire?"

She was as soft and vulnerable that day as I've ever seen her. Ironically, by all the laws of nature, Shel was dead. Was I still bound to keep my distance? And the truth was that Shel did not even care enough to ease her suffering. I wondered how she would react if she knew Shel was probably sitting in my kitchen at that moment, making a submarine sandwich.

I wanted to tell her. There was a possibility that, when she *did* find out, she would hold it against *me*. I also wanted to keep Shel dead. That was hard to admit to myself, but it was true. I wanted nothing more than a clear channel with Helen Suchenko. But when I watched her bite down the pain, when the sobs began, when she excused herself with a shaky voice and hurried back to the ladies' room, I could stand it no more. "Helen," I said, "are you free this afternoon?"

She sighed. "I wanted to go into the office today, but people get nervous around weepy physicians. Yes, I'm more or less free. But I'm not in the mood to go anywhere."

"Can I persuade you to come out to my place?"

She looked desperately fragile. "I don't think so, Dave," she said. "I need some time."

A long silence fell between us. "Please," I said. "It's important."

More snow was coming. I watched it through the windshield, thick gray clouds drifting toward us. Approaching cars had their headlights on.

Helen followed me in her small blue Ford. I watched her in the mirror, playing back all possible scenarios on how to handle this. Tell her first, I finally decided. Leave out the time travel stuff. Use the story I'd told Jerry as an example of how misunderstandings can occur. *He's not dead, Helen.* She won't believe it, of course. But that's when I get him and bring him into the room. Best not to warn *him*. God knows how he would react. But get them together, present Shel with a *fait accompli*, and you will have done your self-sacrificial duty, Dave. You dumb bastard.

I pulled through blowing snow into my driveway, opened the garage,

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and went in. Helen rolled in beside me, and the doors closed. "Glad to be out of that," she said, with a brave smile that implied she had decided we needed something new to talk about.

The garage opened directly into the kitchen. I stopped before going through the door and listened. There were no sounds on the other side. "Helen," I said, "I've got something to tell you."

She pulled her coat around her. Her breath formed a mist. "We aren't going to go into it out here, I hope, are we?"

"No," I said, as if the notion were absurd, and opened the door. The kitchen was empty. I heard no sounds anywhere in the house.

"It's about Shel," I said.

She stepped past me and switched on the kitchen lights. "I know," she said. "What else could it be?"

A white envelope lay on the table, with my name on it, printed in his precise hand. I snatched it up, and she looked at me curiously. "What is it?" she asked.

"Just a list of things to do." I pushed it into my pocket. "How about some coffee?"

"Sure. Sounds good."

"It'll have to be instant," I said, putting a pot of water on the stove.

"Do you always do that?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"Write yourself notes?"

"It's my to-do list. It's the first thing I do every morning."

She got two cups down and I excused myself, slipped out, and opened the envelope.

Dear Dave,

I don't know how to write this. But I have to think about what's happened, and figure out what I need to do. I don't want to jump the gun if it's not necessary. You understand.

I know this hasn't been easy for you. But I'm glad you were there. Thanks.

Shel

P.S. I've left most of my estate to the Leukemia Foundation. That will generate a half-dozen lawsuits from my relatives. But if any of those vultures show signs of winning, I'll come back personally and deal with them.

I read it a half-dozen times. Then I crumpled it, tossed it, and went back to the kitchen.

She was looking out the window at the falling snow. Usually, my grounds were alive with blue jays and squirrels. But the critters were all tucked away now. "It's lovely," she said unexpectedly. And then: "So what's the surprise?"

Startled, I tried laughing to gain time. "Son of a gun," I said. "I went

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out to get it and came back without it." We strolled into the living room, where she sat down on the sofa. I hurried upstairs in search of an idea.

I think I mentioned that the wardrobe was also a small museum. There were items of inestimable value, but only if you knew their origin. We had scrolls from the library at Alexandria, a sextant designed and built by Leonardo, a silver bracelet that had once belonged to Calpurnia, a signed folio of *Hamlet*, a pocket watch that Leo Tolstoy had carried while writing *War and Peace*. There were photos of Martin Luther and Albert Schweitzer and Attila the Hun and Charles XII of Sweden. All more or less worthless.

I couldn't bear to give away Calpurnia's bracelet to someone who would not understand its true value. I settled instead for a gold medallion I'd bought from a merchant in Thebes during the fifth century, B.C. It carried a handsomely wrought likeness of a serpent. The Apollonian priest who was with me insisted I had acquired a steal. At one time, he said, it had belonged to Aesculapius, the divine doctor, who had been so good he cured the dead. He backed up his view by trying to buy it from me, offering six times what I'd paid for it.

I carried it downstairs and gave it to Helen, telling her that Shel had wanted me to be sure she got it in the event anything happened to him. She glowed, and turned it over and over, unable to get enough of it. "It's exquisite," she said. And the tears came again.

If that thing had possessed any curative powers, I could have used them at that moment.

Snow filled the world. The stand of oaks bordering the approach to the house faded out. As did the stone wall along Carmichael Drive, and the hedges on the west side of the property. Gradually a heavy white curtain was drawn across the middle of the lawn. "I think we're going to get a foot before this is over," I told Helen.

She stood by the curtains, enjoying a glass of Chablis. I'd started the fire, and it cracked and pocked comfortably. We added Mozart, and I hoped the storm would continue.

"I think so too," she said. A pair of headlights crept past, out beyond the stone wall. "I feel sorry for anybody out in this."

I stood beside her, and we talked inconsequentials. She had recovered herself, and I began to realize that it was her proximity to me, with all the baggage I brought to any meeting, that had triggered the emotional display earlier. I was not happy that Shel was still in the field. But during that afternoon, I came to understand that even if Shel were safely in his grave, I might still be the embodiment of too many memories. The decent thing to do would be to fade out of her life, just as Carmichael Drive and the outer grounds were fading now. But I knew I could not bring myself to do that.

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She talked about looking for a break in the weather so she could go home. But luck held and the break did not come. The snow piled up, and we stayed near the fire. I was alone at last with Helen Suchenko, and it was perhaps the most painful few hours of my life. Yet I would not have missed them, and I have replayed them countless times since, savoring every movement. Every word. *I feel sorry for anybody out in this.* I was out in it, and I believed I would never find shelter.

We watched the reports on the Weather Channel. It was a heavy system, moving down from Canada, low pressure and high pressure fronts colliding, eight inches predicted, which, on top of yesterday's storm, was expected to shut down the entire east coast from Boston to Baltimore.

She talked a lot about Shel that day. Periodically, she'd shake her head as if she'd remembered something, and then dismiss it. And she'd veer off onto some other subject, a movie she'd seen, the latest political scandal, a medical advance that held hope for a breakthrough in this or that. There were a couple of patients she was worried about, and a few hypochondriacs whose lives were centered on their imagined illnesses. I told her how much I missed teaching, which wasn't entirely true, but it's the sort of thing people expect you to say. What I really missed was a sense of purpose, a reason to exist. I had that upstairs, in notes detailing conversations with Rachmaninoff and Robert E. Lee and Oliver Cromwell and Aristotle and H. G. Wells. Those conversations would make the damnedest book the world had ever seen, reports by the principal actors on their ingenuity, their dreams, their follies. But it would never get written.

We lost the cable at four o'clock, and with it the Weather Channel.

Gradually, the light faded out of the sky. I put on steaks and Helen made up a salad. Our timing was perfect because the power failed just as we put everything on the table. I lit a couple of candles, and she sat in the flickering light and looked happy. If the clouds had not dissipated, at least for these few hours they had receded.

Afterward, we retreated into the living room. The music had been silenced by the power outage, so we sat listening to the fire and the whisper of snow against the house. Occasionally, I glanced up at the door to the wardrobe, half-expecting it to open. I tried to plan what I would do if Shel suddenly appeared on the landing. I was caught in the ultimate eternal triangle.

It did not happen. We talked into the early hours, until finally she gave out and fell asleep. I moved her to the sofa and went upstairs for blankets. The heating system, of course, was not working, nor was anything else in this all-electric house. The second floor was already cooling off, but I had plenty of firewood.

I settled into a large armchair and drifted into sleep. Somewhere around two, I woke and lay for a time, listening to the silence. The fire

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was low. I poked at it, and tossed on another log. Helen stirred but did not waken.

The storm must have passed over. Usually, even during the early morning hours, there are sounds: a passing car, the wind in the trees, a dog barking somewhere. But the world was absolutely still.

It was also absolutely dark. No stars. No lights of any kind.

I pointed a flashlight out the window. The night had closed in, wrapped itself around the house so tightly that the beam seemed to plunge into a black wall. I felt internal switches go to alert. It looked like an effect out of a Dracula film.

I picked up the phone to call the 24-hour weather line. But it was dead.

"What is it, Dave?" Helen's voice was soft in the dark.

"You awake?" I asked.

"Sort of."

"Come take a look out the window."

She padded over. And caught her breath. "Where'd that come from?"

"I don't know."

We went outside. It was the thickest, darkest fog I'd ever seen. We didn't sleep well the rest of the night. At about six, Helen made toast over the fire, and I broke out some fruit juice. The lights were still off. More ominously, there was no sign of dawn.

I wondered about Ray White, my neighbor. Ray was a good guy, but he lived alone in a big house, and I thought of him over there wrapped in this goddamn black cloud with no power and maybe no food. He wasn't young, and I thought it would be a good idea to go check on him.

"I'll go with you," Helen said.

I got an extra flashlight, and we let ourselves out through the sliding door. I locked up, and we poked around until we found the pathway that leads down to the front gate. The flashlights didn't help much. There's a hundred-year-old oak midway between the house and the stone wall. It's only about ten feet off the walk, but we could not see it. I heard something stirring in its branches.

We picked our way to the front gate. I opened it, and we eased out onto the sidewalk. "The entrance to Ray's house is across the street, about twenty yards down," I said. "Stay close."

We stepped off the curb. Her hand tightened in mine. "Be careful," she said. "Somebody might be trying to drive."

We started across, but the snow cover stopped right in the middle of the street. It was the damnedest thing. There was no snow at all on the other side. There wasn't even *blacktop*. The surface had turned to rock. Where the hell was there rock on the other side of Carmichael Drive? A patch of grass, yes, and some concrete. But not rock.

Something in my voice scared her. "You sure you know where we are?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course."

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The rock was black. It almost looked like marble.

We found no curb. No sidewalk. None of the trees that lined the far side of the street. No sign of the low wall that encloses Ray White's sprawling grounds and executive mansion.

We found nothing.

I tried calling White's name. But no one answered.

"Are you sure we came out the right way?" Helen asked.

4.

Saturday, November 26. Late morning.

I woke up in a room lit only by a low fire. "You okay?" Helen asked. Her voice was thin.

I looked at the clock on the mantel. It was almost noon.

She came over and sat down beside me. "I've never seen weather like this," she said.

I got up, collected snow, and melted it to make water. (It's amazing how much snow you have to melt to get a little water.) I went into the bathroom, and, with the help of a flashlight, brushed my teeth. I tried to draw the bathroom around me, as a kind of shield against what was happening outside the house. The shower. The medicine cabinet. A couple of bars of soap. It was familiar, my anchor to reality.

When I returned downstairs, Helen was putting the phone back in the cradle. She shook her head no. It was still out. We opened a can of meat, added some vegetables, and cooked them over the fire. No matter what happened, we were in no personal danger. That was good to know, but it did not ease my fears.

Helen said she wasn't hungry, but she ate well anyhow. So did I.

It had to do with Shel. I knew that beyond any doubt. We were in the presence of the irrational. I wondered whether we had already done irreparable damage, whether the old world had already receded beyond recall. I was terrified.

When we'd finished eating, I went upstairs to the wardrobe. Shel would be easy to find.

He was standing where I knew he would be: on the slopes of Thermopolae watching the troops come in. He looked good. Tanned. Fit. Almost like a man on vacation. There were a few lines around the eyes, and I knew that, for him, several years had passed since the funeral.

"Shel," I said. "We need you."

"I know," he said gently. Below us, the Thespians were examining the ground on which they would fight. Out on the plain, north of the pass, we could see the Persian army. They stretched to the horizon. "I *will* go back."

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"When?"

His eyes took on a hunted look. "When I'm ready. When I'm *able*. There's no hurry, Dave. We both know that."

"I'm not so sure," I said. "Something's wrong. We can't even *find* the rest of New Jersey."

"I'm trying to live my life," he said. "Be patient with me. I have a lot to do yet. But don't worry. You can count on me."

"When?"

"We have all the time in the world. Relax."

"Okay, Shel. Help me relax. If you're going to take care of everything, tell me what's causing the weather conditions back home? Why the power is out? Why I can't find my way across the street?"

"I know about all that," he said.

"And—?"

"Look. Maybe it has nothing to do with me."

The Hellenic squadrons were still filing in, their bright mail dusty from the journey north.

"I doubt it," I said.

He nodded. "As do I. But I've promised to go back. What more do you want?"

"Maybe you should do it now."

He glanced up at a promontory about a hundred feet over our heads. "What is *now* to you and me, Dave? What does the word mean?" When I did not respond, he knelt down and broke off a blade of grass. "Would you be willing to throw yourself from the top of that rock?"

"That has nothing to do with the business between us," I said.

"Not even if I pleaded with you to do so? If the world depended on it?"

I looked at him.

"What if it didn't matter whether you did it today or tomorrow? Or next month? Or forty years from now?"

"We don't *have* forty years."

"I'm not asking for forty of *your* years. I'm asking for forty of *mine*. I'll do it, Dave. God help me, I'll do it. But on my own schedule. Not yours."

I turned away from him, and he thought I was going to travel out. "Don't," he said. "Dave, try to understand. I'm scared of this."

"I know," I said.

"Good. I need you to know."

We passed ourselves off as traveling law-givers. We moved among the Hellenic troops, wishing them well, assuring them that Hellas would never forget them. We first glimpsed Leonidas sitting with his captains around a campfire.

People accustomed to modern security precautions would be amazed at how easy it was to approach him. He accepted our good wishes and observed that, considering our physical size, we would both have made ex-

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cellent soldiers had we chosen that line of work. In fact, both Shel and I towered over him.

He had dark eyes and was only in his thirties. He brimmed with confidence, as did his men. There was no sense here of a doomed force.

He knew about the road that circled behind the pass, and he had already dispatched troops to cover it. The Phocians, as I recalled. Who would run at the first onset.

He invited us to share a meal. This was the third day of the standoff, before any blood had yet been spilt. We talked with him about Sparta's system of balancing the executive by crowning two kings. And whether democracy would really work in the long run. He thought not. "Athens cannot stay the course," he said. "They have no discipline, and their philosophers encourage them to put themselves before their country. God help us if the poison ever spreads to us." Later, over wine, he asked where we were from, explaining that he could not place the accent.

"America," I said.

He shook his head. "It must be far to the north. Or very small."

We each posed with Leonidas, and took pictures, explaining that it was a ritual that would allow us to share his courage. Sparks crackled up from the campfires, and the soldiers talked about home and the future.

Later, I traded a gold coin to one of the Thespian archers for an arrow. "I'm not sure that's a good idea," Shel said. "He may need the arrow before he's done."

I knew better. "One arrow more or less will make no difference. When the crunch comes, the Thespians will refuse to leave their Spartan allies. They'll die too. All fifteen hundred of them."

And history will remember only the Spartans.

We watched them, exercising and playing games in full view of their Persian enemies. Shel turned to me, and his face was cold and hard. "You know, David," he said, "you are a monster."

5.

Saturday, November 26. Mid-afternoon.

"This is not just heavy fog," she said. "It's *midnight* out there." Helen bit down on a grape.

I sat staring at the window, wondering what lay across Carmichael Drive.

She was lovely in the candlelight. "My guess is that a volcano erupted somewhere," she said. "I know that sounds crazy in South Jersey, but it's all I can think of." She was close to me. Warm and vulnerable and open. I reached out and touched her hair. Stroked it. She did not draw away. "I'm glad I was *here* when it happened, Dave. Whatever it is that's happened."

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"So am I," I said.

She smiled appreciatively. And after a moment: "So what do *you* think?"

I took a deep breath. "I think I know what it is."

"I'm listening."

"Helen, there's a lot about Shel you don't know. To put it mildly." Her eyes widened. "Not other women," I added hurriedly. "Or anything like that."

That's not the kind of statement, I suppose, that gets any kind of reaction. Helen just froze in place. "I mean it," I said. "He has a working time machine." I was speaking of him in the present tense. With Shel it gets sort of confused.

"I could almost believe it," she said, after a moment.

I'd been debating whether to destroy my own unit. It would have been the rational thing to do, and the day after Shel's death I'd even gone down to the river with it. But I hadn't been able to bring myself to throw it into the water. Next week, I'd thought. There's plenty of time. "Here," I said. "I'll show you one." I took it out of the desk and handed it to her. It looks like an oversized watch. "You just strap it on, connect it to the power pack, here. Set the destination, and punch the stem."

She looked at it curiously. "What *is* it really, Dave? A notebook TV?"

"Hell with this," I said. I have to walk to keep my weight down. Three miles a day, every day. Other people walk around the block, or go down to a park. I like Ambrose, Ohio, near the beginning of the century. It's a pleasant little town with tree-lined streets and white picket fences, where straw hats are in vogue for the men, and bright ribbons for the ladies. Down at the barber shop, the talk is mostly about the canal they're going to build through Panama.

I pulled Helen close, brought up Ambrose's coordinates, and told her to brace herself. "The sensation's a little odd at first. But it only lasts a few seconds. And I'll be with you."

The living room froze. She stiffened.

The walls and furniture faded to a green landscape with broad lawns and shingled houses and gas street lamps.

When we came out of it, she backed into me. "What happened?" she asked, looking wildly around.

"We've just gone upstream. Into the past. It's 1905. Theodore Roosevelt is President."

She didn't say anything for a long time. Birds sang, and in the distance we could hear the clean bang of church bells. We were standing outside a general store. About a block away there was a railroad siding.

The wind blew against us.

Her breathing had gone somewhat irregular. "It's okay," I said. "It just takes a little getting used to."

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It was late September. People were working in yards, talking over back fences. "We're really here, aren't we?"

"Yes," I said. "We are."

"My God." She took a long, deep breath. The air smelled of burning leaves. I saw hurt come into her eyes. "Why didn't he ever say anything?"

"He kept it a secret for twenty years, Helen. It was habitual with him. He wanted to tell you, and he would have got around to it in his own good time." I shrugged. "Anyway, no one else knows. And no one should. I'll deny this whole thing if anyone ever asks."

She nodded. "Is this," lifting a hand in the general direction of the town, "connected with the problem at home? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"I think so." Cabbage was cooking somewhere. I told her about Shel, how he had died but was still alive. Her color changed and she moved closer to me. When I'd finished, she only stared straight ahead.

"He's still alive," she said at last.

In a way, he'll always be alive. "Yes," I said. "He's still out there." I explained about the funeral, and how he had reacted.

I could see her struggling to grasp the idea, and to control her anger. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know how," I said numbly.

"You can take us back, right?"

"Home? Yes."

"And where else?"

"Anywhere. Well, there are range limits, but nothing you'd care about."

A couple of kids with baseball gloves hurried past. "What you're saying," she said, "is that Shel should go back and walk into that fire. And if he doesn't, the black fog will not go away. Right? Is that what you're saying?"

"It's what I *think*. Yes, Helen, that's what he should do."

"But he's said he *would* do that? Right? And by the crazy logic of this business, it shouldn't matter when."

"But something's *wrong*. I think he never did go back. Never *will* go back. And I think that's the problem."

"I don't understand any of this," she said.

"I know." I watched a man with a handcart moving along the street, selling pickles and relishes. "I don't either. But there's a continuity. A track. Time flows along the track." I squeezed her hand. "We've torn out a piece of it."

"And—?"

"I think the locomotive went into the river."

She tried to digest that. "Okay," she said. "Grant the time machine. Dave, what you're asking him to do is unreasonable. I wouldn't go back either to get hit in the head and thrown into a fire. Would you?"

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I got up. "Helen, what you or I would do doesn't much matter. I know this sounds cold, but I think we have to find a way to get Shel where he belongs."

She stood up, and looked west, out of town. The fields were brown, dried out from the summer heat. "You know where to find him?"

"Yes."

"Will you take me to him?"

"Yes." And, after a pause: "Will you help me?"

She stared at the quiet little buildings. White clapboard houses. A carriage pulled by two horses just coming around a corner. "Nineteen-five," she said. "Shaw's just getting started."

I didn't push. I probably didn't need her to plead with him. Maybe just seeing her would jar something loose. And I knew where I wanted to confront him. At the one event in all of human history that might flay his conscience. "Let's go home," I said. "We need to do some sewing."

"Why?"

"You're going to need a costume."

She looked at me and her eyes were hooded. "Why don't we just shoot him?" she said. "And drag him back?"

"It seems that what you are really asking, Simmias, is whether death annihilates the soul?" Socrates looked from one to another of his friends.

The one who had put the question was, like most of the others, young and clear-eyed, but subdued in the shadow of the prison house. "It is an important matter," he said. "There is none of more importance. But we were reluctant—" He hesitated, his voice caught, and he could go no farther.

"I understand," said Socrates. "You fear this is an indelicate moment to raise such an issue. But if you would discuss it with me, we cannot very well postpone it, can we?"

"No, Socrates," said a thin young man with red hair. "Unfortunately, we cannot." This, I knew, was Crito.

Despite Plato's account, the final conversation between Socrates and his disciples did not take place in his cell. It might well have begun there, but they were in a wide, utilitarian meeting room when Helen and I arrived. Several women were present. Socrates, then seventy years old, sat at ease on a wooden chair, while the rest of us gathered around him in a half-circle. To my surprise and disappointment, I did not see Shel.

Socrates was, on first glance, a man of mundane appearance. He was of average height, for the time. He was clean-shaven, and he wore a dull red robe. Only his eyes were extraordinary, conveying the impression that they were lit from within. When they fell curiously on me, as they did from time to time, I imagined that he knew where I had come from, and why I was there.

Beside me, Helen writhed under the impact of conflicting emotions.

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She had been ecstatic at the chance to see Shel again, although I knew she had not yet accepted the idea that he was alive. When he did not arrive, she looked at me as if to say she had told me so, and settled back to watch history unfold. She was, I thought, initially disappointed, in that the event seemed to be nothing more than a few people sitting around talking in an uncomfortable room in a prison. As if the scene should somehow be scored and choreographed and played to muffled drums. She had read Plato's account before we left. I tried to translate for her, but we gave it up. I was just getting in the way of the body language and the voices, which, she said, had a meaning and drama all their own.

"When?" she whispered, after we'd been there almost an hour. "When does it happen?"

"Sunset, I think," I said.

She made a noise deep in her throat.

"Why do men fear death?" Socrates asked.

"Because," said Crito, "they believe that it is the end of existence."

There were almost twenty people present. Most were young, but there was a sprinkling of middle-aged and elderly persons. The most venerable of these looked like Moses, a tall man with a white beard and expressive white eyebrows and a fierce countenance. He gazed intently at Socrates throughout, and periodically nodded when the philosopher hammered home a particularly salient point.

"And do all men fear death?" asked Socrates.

"Most assuredly, Socrates," said a boy, who could have been no more than eighteen.

Socrates addressed the boy. "Do even the brave fear death, Cebes?"

Cebes thought it over. "I have to think so, Socrates."

"Why then do the valiant dare death? Is it perhaps because they fear something else even more?"

"The loss of their honor," said Crito with conviction.

"Thus we are faced with the paradox that even the brave are driven by fear. Can we find no one who can face death with equanimity who is *not* driven by fear?"

Moses was staring at Helen. I moved protectively closer to her.

"Of all men," said Crito, "only you seem to show no concern at its approach."

Socrates smiled. "Of all men," he said, "only a philosopher can truly face down death. Because he knows quite certainly that the soul will proceed to a better existence. Provided he has maintained a lifelong pursuit of knowledge and virtue, and has not allowed his soul, which is his divine essence, to become entangled in concerns of the body. For when this happens, the soul takes on corporeal characteristics. And when death comes, it cannot escape. This is why cemeteries are restless at night."

"How can we be sure," asked a man in a blue toga who had not previ-

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ously spoken, "that the soul, even if it succeeds in surviving the trauma of death, is not scattered by the first strong wind?"

It was not intended as a serious question, but Socrates saw that it affected the others. So he answered lightly, observing that it would be prudent to die on a calm day, and then undertook a serious response. He asked questions that elicited admissions that the soul was not physical and therefore could not be a composite object. "I think we need not fear that it will come apart," he said, with a touch of amusement.

One of the jailers lingered in the doorway throughout the long discussion. He seemed worried, and at one point cautioned Socrates against speaking too much, or getting excited. "If you get the heat up," he said, "the poison will not work well."

"We would not wish that," Socrates replied. But he saw the pained expression on the jailer's face, and I thought he immediately regretted the remark.

Women arrived with lunch, and several stayed, so that the room became more and more crowded. In fact, no doors were locked, and no guards, other than the reluctant jailer, were in evidence. Phaedo, who is the narrator of Plato's account, was beside me. He told me that the authorities had hoped profoundly that Socrates would run off. "They did everything they could to avoid this," he said. "There is even a rumor that last night they offered him money and transportation if he would leave."

Socrates saw us conversing, and he said, "Is there something in my reasoning that disturbs you?"

I'd lost the train of the discussion, but Phaedo said, "Yes, Socrates. However, I hesitate to put my objection to you."

Socrates turned a skeptical gaze on him. "Truth is what it is. Tell me what disturbs you, Phaedo."

He swallowed to make sure of his voice. "Then let me ask," he said in a carefully neutral tone, "whether you are being truly objective on this matter? The sun is not far from the horizon and, although it grieves me to say it, were I in your position, I also would argue in favor of immortality."

"Were you in his position," said Crito, with a smile, "you would have taken the first ship to Syracuse." The company laughed, Socrates as heartily as any, and the strain seemed relieved for the moment.

"You are of course correct in asking, Phaedo. Am I seeking truth? Or trying to convince myself? I can only respond that, if my arguments are valid, then that is good. If they are false, and death does indeed mean annihilation, they nevertheless arm me to withstand its approach. And that too is good." He looked utterly composed. "If I'm wrong, it's an error that won't survive the sunset."

Simmias was seated immediately to the right of Moses. "I for one am convinced," he said. "Your arguments do not admit of refutation. And it

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is a comfort to me to believe that we have it in our power to draw this company together again in some place of the gods' choosing."

"Yes," said Crito. "I agree. And, Socrates, we are fortunate to have you here to explain it to us."

"Anyone who has thought about these issues," said Socrates, "should be able to reach, if not truth, at least a high degree of probability."

Moses seemed weighed down with the infirmities of age, and with the distress of the present calamity. Still, he continued to glance periodically at Helen. Now, for the first time, he spoke: "I very much fear, Socrates, that within a few hours there will be no one left anywhere in Hellas, or anywhere else for that matter, who will be able to make these matters plain."

"That's *Shel*'s voice," Helen gasped, straining forward to see better. The light was not good, and he was turned away from us now, his face hidden in the folds of his hood.

Then he turned and looked openly at us. He smiled sadly at her. And his lips formed the English words *hello, Helen.*

She was getting to her feet.

At that moment, the jailer appeared with the poisoned cup, and the sight of him, and the silver vessel, froze everyone in the chamber. "I hope you understand, Socrates," he said, "this is not my doing."

"I know that, Thereus," said Socrates. "I am not angry with you."

"They always want to blame *me,*" Thereus said.

Silence flowed through the chamber.

The jailer laid the cup on the table before him. "It is time," he said.

The rest of the company, following Helen's example, got one by one to their feet.

Socrates gave a coin to the jailer, squeezed his hand, thanked him, and turned to look at his friends one last time. "The world is very bright," he said. "But much of it is illusion. If we stare at it too long, in the way we look at the sun during an eclipse, it blinds us. Look at it only with the mind." He picked up the hemlock. Several in the assemblage started forward, but were restrained by their companions. Someone in back sobbed.

"Stay," a voice said sternly. "You have respected him all your life. Do so now."

He lifted the cup to his lips, and his hand trembled. It was the only time the mask slipped. Then he drank the hemlock down and laid the cup on the table. "I am sure Simmias is right," he said. "We shall gather again one day, as old friends should, in a far different chamber."

Shel clasped Helen a long time in his big arms. "It's good to see you again," he said. Tears ran down his cheeks.

She shivered. "What happened to you?" she asked.

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A smile flickered across his lips. "I've been traveling a long time." He stood silhouetted against the moon and the harbor. Behind us, the waterfront buildings of the Piraeus were illuminated by occasional lamps. He turned toward me. "David, you seem to have become my dark angel."

I was emotionally drained. "I'm sorry you feel that way," I said.

A gull wheeled overhead. "Socrates dies for a philosophical nicety. And Shelborne continues to run when all the world is at stake. Right?"

"That's right," I said.

Helen was still trembling. "I don't understand," she whispered.

His lips twitched, and he ran his hand over the long white whiskers. He looked haunted. "I haven't seen you for forty years," he said. "You have no idea how many times I've gone to sleep dreaming of you. And you are even lovelier than I remember."

I put a hand on her shoulder. Steadied her. "He's been out here a long time."

Her eyes blazed. "What happened to *my* Shel? What did you do with him?"

"He's been living his allotted years," he said. "Making them count for as much as he can as long as he can. Before my conscience here—" lifting his eyes and targeting me, "before my conscience succeeds in driving me into my grave."

She couldn't hold back any longer. Her tears flowed freely, and the water lapped against the piers. In that moment, I hated him.

"I've tried to go back," he said. "God help me, I've tried. But I could not bring myself to lie in that bed." Anger surfaced. I could not tell where it was directed. "Did you know that my skull was crushed?"

We knew.

He looked very old. And broken. He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. The robes had no pockets. But he needed some kind of defensive gesture, so he folded his arms and turned to face the harbor. "I am not Socrates, Dave," he said. "I will not drink from his cup." His eyes locked on mine, and I could see him come to a decision. He drew us together, within the field of his Watch, and punched in a set of coordinates. "But I will settle the issue for you."

Helen shook her head no. No more surprises. And everything began to slow down. The harbor winked out, a ship's deck materialized underfoot, and the sky filled with fire.

We were on a Roman galley. The air was thick with powder and cinders, and the sails were down. We were pitching and rolling. The ocean broke across the deck, and men scrambled and swore at their stations. Below us, long oars dipped rhythmically into the waves. It was daylight, but we could not see more than twenty feet.

"How did you manage that?" I screamed at Shel over the hurricane of

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noise. The Watches had never possessed the precision to land people on a ship at sea.

"It's been a lot of years," he said. "Technology's better than it used to be."

"Where are we?" demanded Helen, barely able to make herself heard.

Shel was hanging onto a ladder. His clothes were drenched. "A.D. 79," he said. "Just west of Pompeii."

His eyes were afire. His silver hair was already streaked with black ash, and I began to suspect he had lost whatever anchor he might have had to reality. Time had become perhaps too slippery for him at last.

The ship rolled to starboard, and would have dumped Helen into the sea had the old man not grabbed her, and hung on, pushing me aside. "Isn't this glorious?" he asked.

"Why are we here?" Helen demanded, wiping her eyes.

The sea and the wind roared, and the dust was blinding.

"*I* will pick the time of my death," he cried. "And its manner."

I was trying to scramble toward him, but I could do no more than hang on.

"I am uniquely qualified—"

We went down into a trough, and I thought the sea was going to bury us.

"—To make that choice," he continued, ignoring the ocean. "My death will be an appropriate finale to the symphony of my life."

A fireball roared overhead, and plowed into the water.

"Don't do it," I cried.

"Have no fear, David. I'm not ready yet. But when I am, this will be the way of it." He smiled at me and touched the Watch. "What better end for a time traveler than sailing with Pliny the Elder?" And he was gone.

"What was that all about?" called Helen. We dipped again and salt water poured across the deck. "Maybe we ought to get out of here too."

I agreed, and wrapped one arm around a stanchion, something to hang onto while I set the Watch.

"Wait," she said. "Do you know who Pliny the Elder is?"

"A Roman philosopher."

"I did a paper on him once. He was an essayist and moralist. Fought a lot for the old values."

"Helen, can we talk about it later?"

"He was also a naval officer. He's trying to rescue survivors. Dave, if Shel meant what he said, he'll be back."

"I understand that."

"He'll be older. But he'll be back."

"We can't do anything about that. I don't think we want to wait around here."

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We were on the starboard side, near the beam. The sails were down, and a few shadowy figures were moving through the volcanic haze. (I would have expected to hear the roar of the volcano, of Vesuvius, but the only noise came from the sea and the warm dry wind that blew across the deck.) "Let's try the other side," I said.

He was there, on the port quarter, clinging to a line, while the wind howled. Even more ancient this time, frail, weary, frightened. Dressed differently than he had been, in slacks and a green pullover that might have come out of the 1930s.

Cinders stung my eyes.

He saw us and waved. "I've been looking for you." His gaze lingered on Helen, and then drifted toward the sea. His eyes seemed utterly devoid of reasoning. Nothing of the old Shelborne seemed to be left.

"Don't," I cried.

She let go her handhold and tried to scramble across the pitching deck.

He was hanging onto a hawser, balanced near the rail.

The ship pitched, went up the front of a wave and down the back. He raised his hand in a farewell gesture, and the sea broke across the deck. I was thrown hard against a gunwale. The night was filled with water.

When it ended, Shel was gone. The rail was clear, and the line to which he'd clung whipped back and forth.

Helen shouted and pointed. I saw him briefly, rising over a swell, clutching a board and struggling to stay afloat, his white hair trailing in the water. But another wave broke over him and moments later the board popped to the surface, and drifted into the haze.

Something in the ship gave way with a loud crack, and the crewmen cried out. I pulled Helen close.

"Dead again," she said.

Maybe this time for good. I pressed the stem.

6.

Saturday, November 26. Mid-afternoon.

We returned to the wardrobe in separate, but equally desperate, moods.

Helen could not connect the wild man on the galley with Shel, or even the moody septuagenarian on the dock at the Piraeus. Furthermore, she had not yet accepted either the reality or the implications of time travel. Yet, on a primal level, she had seen him. And for the second time during two weeks, she mourned him.

And I? I'd lost all feeling. How could I reconcile two graves? I collapsed into a chair and stared helplessly at the costumes, hanging neatly, marked off by period. Damn them. I remembered the planning and re-

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search that had gone into their creation. We had felt so well organized in those days. Prepared for anything.

I let it go.

And then I noticed that I was *seeing* the costumes. There was *light* in the room. It was gray, not bright, but it meant that the black mist was gone. I threw the curtains back, and looked out at a rain-swept landscape.

The trees, the grounds, the walkway, the garage, were visible, huddled together in the storm. The wall still circled the property. And beyond the wall, I could see most of Carmichael Drive. *Most of it.* But Ray White's house was gone. As was the rest of the world over there. Carmichael Drive now skirted the edge of a precipice, its far side missing, broken off into a void. Beyond, I could see only gray sky.

Terrified, we went from room to room. Everywhere, in all directions, the picture was the same. On the east, where my property was most extensive, even the wall was gone. A seldom-used patio had been cut in half, and the stand of elms that used to provide shade for it now lined the limits of the world.

We opened a bottle of brandy and drew all the blinds in the house.

"Can't we replay that last scene?" she asked. "Go back and rescue him? I mean, that's the whole point of a time machine, isn't it? Nothing's ever irrevocable. You make a mistake, you go back and fix it."

I was tired and my head hurt and at that moment I hated Adrian Shelborne with every fiber of my being. "No," I said. "It would just make everything worse. We know what happened. We can't change *that*."

"Dave," she said, "how could we possibly make things *worse?*"

That was a pretty good question.

She eased onto a sofa and closed her eyes. "Time travel," she said, "isn't all it's cracked up to be, is it?"

Rain rattled against the windows. "We need to find a way to eliminate the paradox."

"Okay," she said. "What exactly is the paradox?"

I thought it over. "Adrian Shelborne has two graves. One out on Monument Hill. And the other in the Tyrrhenian Sea. We have to arrange things so that there is only one."

"Can we go back and stop the Friday night fire?"

"Same problem as trying a rescue on the galley. The Friday night fire has already happened, and if you prevent it, then what was the funeral all about?"

"It's like a big knot," she said. "No matter where you try to pull, everything just gets tighter."

We were still wearing our Hellenic robes, which were torn and soiled. And we both needed a shower, but there was no water. On the other hand, we *did* have rain. And as much privacy as we could ever want.

I got soap, towels, and wash cloths. She took the backyard, which was

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more sheltered (as if that mattered), and I stood out front. It was late November, but the weather had turned unseasonably warm nevertheless. Hot water would have been nice, but I felt pretty good anyway after I'd dried off and changed into clean clothes.

Then we sat, each in a kind of private cocoon, thinking about options. Or things lost. The rain continued through the afternoon. I watched rivulets form and wondered how much soil was being washed over the edge. Where? Where would it be going? When the weather cleared, I promised myself that I would walk out and look down.

"Who's buried in the grave on Monument Hill?" she asked.

"Shel."

"How do we know? The body was burned beyond recognition."

"They checked his dental records. We can't *change* that."

She was sitting on the sofa with her legs drawn up under her. "We also can't recover the body from the Tyrrhenian Sea. We have to work on Monument Hill. What can we do about the dental records?"

I looked at her. "I don't think I understand."

"We have a time machine. Use your imagination."

Chain-reaction collisions have become an increasingly dangerous occurrence on limited-access highways around the world. Hundreds die every year, several thousand are injured, and property damage usually runs well into the millions. On the day that we buried Shel, there had been a pile-up in California. It had happened a little after eight o'clock in the morning under conditions of perfect visibility when a pickup rear-ended a station wagon full of kids headed for breakfast and Universal Studios.

We materialized by the side of the road moments after the chain reaction had ended. The highway and the shoulder were littered with wrecked vehicles. Some people were out of their cars trying to help; others were wandering dazed through the carnage. The morning air was filled with screams and the smell of burning oil.

"I'm not sure I can do this," Helen said, spotting a woman bleeding in an overturned Buick. She went over, got the door open, and motioned me to assist. The woman was unconscious, and her right arm was bent in an awkward manner.

"Helen," I said. "We have a bigger rescue to make."

She shook her head. No. This first.

She stopped the bleeding and I got someone to stay with the victim. We helped a few other people, pulled an elderly couple out of a burning van, got one man with two broken legs off the road. (I was horrified. Shel and I had always maintained a strict hands-off policy.) "We don't have time for this," I pleaded.

"I don't have time for anything else," she said.

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Sirens were approaching. I let her go, concentrating on finding what we'd come for.

He was alone in a blue Toyota that had rolled over onto its roof. The front of the car was crumpled, a door was off, and the driver looked dead. He was bleeding heavily from a head wound. One tire was spinning slowly. I could find no pulse.

He was about the right size, tangled in a seat belt. When Helen got there, she confirmed that he was dead. I used a jack knife to cut him free. EMT's had arrived and were spreading out among the wrecked cars. Stretchers were appearing.

Helen could not keep her mind on what we were doing. "Your oath doesn't count," I said. "Not here. Let it go."

She looked at me out of empty eyes.

"Help me get him out," I said.

We wrapped him in plastic and laid him in the road. "He does look a little like Shel," she said in a small voice.

"Enough to get by."

Footsteps were approaching. Someone demanded to know what we were doing.

"It's okay," I said, "we're doctors." I pushed the stem and we were out of there.

His name was Victor Randall. His wallet carried pictures of an attractive woman with cropped brown hair seated with him in a front porch swing. And two kids. The kids were smiling up at the camera, one boy, one girl, both around seven or eight. "Maybe," Helen said, "when this is over, we can send them a note to explain things."

"We can't do that," I said.

"They'll never know what happened to him."

"That's right. And there's no way around it."

There was also about two hundred cash. Later, I would mail that back to the family.

We carried him down to the garage and put him in the Porsche. I adjusted the temporal sweep to maximum, so that when we went the car would go with us.

7.

Thursday, November 10. Near midnight.

Mark S. Hightower had been Shel's dentist for seven years. He operated out of a medical building across the street from Friendship Hospital, where Helen had interned, and where she still served as a consultant.

I'd met Hightower once. He was short, barrel-chested, flat-skulled, a

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man who looked more like a professional wrestler than a dentist. But he was soft-spoken and, according to Shel, particularly good with kids.

We materialized on a lot down on Penrod Avenue, which was in the commercial district. The area was always deserted at night. Ten minutes later, we approached the hospital and pulled into the parking lot at the Forest Elm Medical Center. Hightower was located in back, well away from the street.

Victor was in the front seat, supported from behind by Helen. He was wrapped in plastic. He'd stopped bleeding, and we had cleaned him up as much as we could. "Are you sure you know how to do this?" I asked.

"Of course not, Dave," she said. "I'm not a dentist. But the equipment shouldn't be hard to figure out. How do we get inside?"

I showed her a tire iron. "We'll have to break in."

She looked dismayed. "I thought you could manage something a little more sophisticated than that. Why can't you just use that thing on your wrist and put us right inside the building?"

"Because it's not very precise. We could be here all night." I was thinking of Shel's trick in moving us from the Piraeus to the quarter-deck on Pliny's galley. If I'd tried that, we'd have gone into the ocean.

We put on gloves, and walked around the building, looking for an open window. There was none, but we found a rear exit that did not seem very sturdy. I wedged the tire iron between the door and the jamb, worked it back and forth, and felt the lock give. The door all but came off the hinges. I held my breath, waiting for the screech of a burglar alarm. It didn't come, and we were past the first hurdle.

We went back to the Porsche, got Victor out of the back seat and half-carried, half-dragged him around to the open door. Once inside, we set him in a chair. Then we turned on penlights and looked around. A half-dozen rooms were designated for patients, opening off a corridor that looped around to the reception area. I wandered from office to office, not really knowing what I was looking for. But Helen did one quick turn through the passageway and pointed at a machine tucked away in a corner. "This is it," she said. The manufacturer's label said it was an orthopantomograph. "It does panoramic X-rays," Helen said.

"Panoramic? What's that?"

"Full mouth. It should be all we'll need."

The idea was that the person being X-rayed placed his forehead against a plastic rest, and his chin in a cup-shaped support. The camera was located inside a cone which was mounted on a rotating arm. The arm and cone would traverse the head, and produce a single panoramic image of the teeth. The only problem was that the patient normally stood during the procedure.

"It'll take six to eight minutes," said Helen. "During that time we have to keep him absolutely still. Think you can do it?"

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"I can do it," I said.

"Okay." She checked to make sure there was a film cassette in the machine. "Let's get him."

We carried Victor to the orthopantomograph. At Helen's suggestion, we'd brought along some cloth strips that we now used to secure him to the device. It was an uncomfortable and clumsy business, and he kept sliding away from us. Working in the dark complicated the procedure, but after about twenty minutes we had him in place.

"Okay," she said. "He should be all right now. Don't touch him. Right?"

I backed away.

"Something just occurred to me," I said. "Victor Randall already has the head wound."

Her eyes closed momentarily. "You're suggesting the arsonist didn't hit Shel in the head after all?"

"That's what I think."

She considered that piece of data. "This keeps getting weirder," she said.

A mirror was mounted on the machine directly in front of the patient's face. Helen pressed a button and a light went on in the center of the mirror. "They would tell the patient to watch the light," she said. "That's how they're sure they've got it lined up."

"How are *we* sure?"

"What's the term? 'Dead reckoning'?" She punched another button. A motor started, and the cone began to move.

Ten minutes later we took the cassette in back, carefully leaving Victor in place until we were sure we had good pictures. The developer was located in a windowless storage room. Helen removed the film from the cassette and ran it through the machine. When the finished picture came out, she handed it to me without looking at it. "What do you think?"

The entire mouth, uppers and lowers, was clear. "Looks good," I said.

She held it against the light. "Plenty of fillings on both sides. Let's see how it compares."

The records were maintained in manila folders behind the reception desk. Helen found Shel's, and sat down with it at the desk, where the counter hid her from anyone passing outside.

The folder was filled with records of Shel's visits. "He goes every three months," she said. "That's not bad." (She also tended to talk about him in the present tense.) The results of his most recent checkup were clipped on the right side. In the middle of the sheet was a panoramic picture, like the one we had just taken, and several smaller photos of individual sections. "I think they call these 'wings' " she said. "But when they bring a dentist in to identify a body, they do it with *these*." She held up the panoramic and compared the two. "They don't look much alike in detail. And if they ever get around to comparing it with the wings, they'll notice something's wrong. But we should have enough to get by."

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She removed Shel's panoramic, and substituted the one we had just taken. Then she replaced the folder. We wiped off the headrest and checked the floor to be sure we'd spilled no blood. "One more thing," said Helen. She inserted a fresh cassette into the orthopantomograph. "Okay. We've done what we came to do. Let's clear out."

"Wait a minute," I said. "They're going to know we broke in. We need to do something to make this look like a burglary." As far as I could see, there wasn't much worth stealing. Magazines. Cheap landscape prints on the walls. "How about a drill?" I said. "They look expensive."

She squeezed my arm. "What kind of burglar would steal a *drill?*" She went on another tour of the office. Moments later, I heard glass breaking, and she came back with a couple of plastic bottles filled with pills. "Valium," she said.

-8.

Saturday, November 12. 1:15 A.M.

I had the coordinates for Shel's workshop, so we were able to go right in.

It was located in the basement of the townhouse, a small, cramped, cluttered place that had a Cray computer front and center, banks of displays, and an array of experimental equipment I had never begun to understand. Moments after we'd arrived, his oil heater came on with a thump.

Helen grumbled that we would have to carry the body up to the second floor. But I had done the best I could. The math had always been Shel's job, and the only place in the house I could get to was the workshop. So we dragged Victor up two flights of stairs to the master bedroom, dressed him in Shel's pajamas, turned back the sheets, and laid him in bed. We put his clothes into a plastic bag.

We also had a brick in the bag. Shel kept his car keys in the middle drawer of a desk on the first floor. We had debated just leaving the clothes to burn, but I wanted to leave nothing to chance. Despite what you might think about time travel, what we were doing was forever. We could not come back and undo it, because we were *here,* and we knew what the sequence of events was, and you couldn't change that without paying down the road. If we knew anything for sure now, we knew *that.*

I had left the Porsche at home this time. So we had to borrow Shel's green Pontiac. It had a vanity plate reading SHEL, and a lot of mileage. But he took good care of it. We drove down to the river. At the two-lane bridge that crosses the Narrows, we pulled off and waited until there was no traffic. Then we pulled onto the bridge, went out to the middle, where we presumed the water was deepest, and dropped the bag over the side. We still had Victor's wallet and ID, which I intended to burn.

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We returned Shel's car to the garage. By now it was about a quarter to two, forty-eight minutes before a Mrs. Wilma Anderson would call to report a fire at the townhouse. I was a little concerned that we had cut things too close, and that the intruder might already be in the house. But the place was still quiet when I returned the car keys to the desk.

We locked the house, front and back, which was how we had found it, and retired across the street, behind a hedge. We were satisfied with our night's work, and curious only to see who the criminal was. The neighborhood was tree-lined, well-lighted, quiet. The houses were middle-class, fronted by small yards that were usually fenced. Cars were parked on either side of the street. There was no traffic, and somewhere in the next block we could hear a cat yowling.

Two o'clock arrived.

"Getting late," Helen said.

Nothing stirred. "He's going to have to hurry up," I said.

She looked at me uncomfortably. "What happens if he doesn't come?"

"He *has* to come."

"Why?"

"Because that's the way it happened. We know that for an absolute fact."

She looked at her watch. Two-oh-one.

"I just had a thought," I said.

"Let's hear it."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe there is no firebug. Or rather, maybe *we* are the firebugs. After all, we already know where the fractured skull came from."

She nodded slowly. "Yeah," she said. "Maybe."

I left the shelter of the hedge and walked quickly across the street, entered Shel's driveway, and went back into the garage. There were several gas cans. They were all empty.

I needed the car keys. But I was locked out now. I used a rock to break a window, got in, and retrieved the keys. I threw the empty cans into the trunk of his Pontiac. "Wait here," I told Helen as I backed out onto the street. "Keep an eye open in case someone *does* show up."

"Where are you going?"

"To get some gas."

There was an all-night station down on River Road, only a few blocks away. It was one of those places where, after eleven o'clock, the cashier locks himself into a glass cage. He was a middle-aged, worn-out guy sitting in a cloud of cigarette smoke. A toothpick rolled relentlessly from one side of his mouth to the other. I filled three cans, paid, and drove back to the townhouse.

It was 2:17 when we began sloshing the gasoline around the basement. We emptied a can on the stairway and another upstairs, taking particu-

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lar care to drench the master bedroom, where Victor Randall lay. We poured the rest of it on the first floor, and so thoroughly soaked the entry that I was afraid to go near it with a lighted match. But at 2:25 we touched it off.

Helen and I watched for a time from a block away. The flames cast a pale glare in the sky, and sparks floated overhead. We didn't know much about Victor Randall, but what we did know maybe was enough. He'd been a husband and father. In their photos, his wife and kids had looked happy. And he got a Viking's funeral.

"What do you think?" asked Helen. "Will it be all right now?"

"Yeah," I said. "I hope so."

9.

Sunday, November 27. Mid-morning.

In the end, the Great November Delusion was written off as precisely that, a kind of mass hysteria that settled across a substantial chunk of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware. Elsewhere, life had gone on as usual, except that the affected area seemed to have vanished behind a black shroud that turned back all attempts at entry, and admitted no signals.

Fortunately, it had lasted only a few hours. When it ended, persons who had been inside emerged with a wide range of stories. They had been stranded on rocky shores or amid needle peaks or in gritty wastes where nothing grew. One family claimed to have been inside a house that had an infinite number of stairways and chambers, but no doors or windows. Psychologists pointed out that the one element that appeared in all accounts was isolation. Sometimes it had been whole communities that were isolated; sometimes families. Occasionally it had been individuals. The general consensus was that, whatever the cause, therapists would be assured of a handsome income for years to come.

My first act on returning home was to destroy Victor Randall's wallet and ID. The TV was back with full coverage of the phenomenon. The National Guard was out, and experts were already appearing on talk shows. I would have been ecstatic with the way things had turned out, except that Helen had sunk into a dark mood. She was thinking about Shel.

"We saved the world," I told her. I showered and changed and put on some bacon and eggs. By the time she came downstairs it was ready. She ate, and cried a little, and congratulated me. "We were brilliant," she said.

After breakfast she seemed reluctant to leave, as if something had been left undone. But she announced finally that she needed to get back to her apartment and see how things were.

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She had just started for the door when we heard a car pull up. "It's a woman," she said, looking out the window. "Friend of yours?"

It was Sgt. Lake. She was alone this time.

We watched her climb the porch steps. A moment later the door bell rang.

"This won't look so good," Helen said.

"I know. You want to duck upstairs?"

She thought about it. "No. What are we hiding?"

The bell sounded again. I crossed the room and opened up.

"Good morning, Dr. Dryden," said the detective. "I'm glad to see you came through it all right. Everything *is* okay?"

"Yes," I said. "How about you?"

Her cheeks were pale. "Good," she said. "I hope it's over." She seemed far more human than during her earlier visit.

"Where's your partner?" I asked.

She smiled. "Everything's bedlam downtown. A lot of people went berserk during that *thing,* whatever it was. We're going to be busy for a while." She took a deep breath and, for the moment at least, some unconscious communication passed between us. "I wonder if I could talk with you?"

"Of course." I stepped back and she came in.

"It's chaos." She seemed not quite able to focus. "Fires, people in shock, heart attacks everywhere. It hasn't been good." She saw Helen and her eyes widened. "Hello, Doctor. I didn't expect to see you here. I expect you're in for a busy day too."

Helen nodded. "You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. Thanks. I'm fine." She stared out over my shoulder. Then, with a start, she tried to wave it all away.

We sat down. "What was it like here?" she asked.

I described what I'd seen. While I was doing so, Helen poured her some coffee and she relaxed a little. She had been caught in her car during the event on a piece of rain-swept foggy highway that just went round and round, covering the same ground. "Damnedest thing," she said. "No matter what I did, I couldn't get off." She shook her head and drank the coffee.

"I could prescribe a sedative," said Helen.

"No, thank you," Lake said. She looked at me carefully. "I wonder if we might have a minute alone?"

"Sure," Helen said. "I should be on my way anyhow." She patted my shoulder in a comradely way and let herself out.

Lake turned her attention to me. "Doctor," she said, "you've informed us you were home in bed at the time of Dr. Shelborne's death. Do you stand by that statement?"

"Yes," I said, puzzled. "I do."

"Are you sure?"

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The question hung in the sunlit air. "Of course I am. Why do you ask?"

I could read nothing in her expression. "Someone answering your description was seen in the neighborhood of the townhouse shortly before the fire."

"It wasn't *me*," I said, suddenly remembering the man at the gas station. And I'd been driving Shel's car. With his vanity plate on the front to underscore the point.

"Okay," she said. "I wonder if you'd mind coming down to the station with me, so we can clear the matter up. Get it settled."

"Sure. Be glad to."

We stood up. "Could I have a moment, please?"

"Certainly," she said, and went outside.

I called Helen on her cellular. "Don't panic," she said. "All you need is a good alibi."

"I don't *have* an alibi."

"For God's sake, Dave. You've got something better. You have a *time machine*."

"Okay. Sure. But if I go back and set up an alibi, why didn't I tell them the truth in the beginning?"

"Because you were protecting a woman's reputation," she said. "What else would you be doing at two o'clock in the morning? Get out your little black book." It might have been my imagination, but I thought the reference to my little black book angered her slightly.

10.

Friday, November 11. Early evening.

The problem was that I didn't have a little black book. I've never been all that successful with women. Not to the extent, certainly, that I could call one up with a reasonable hope of finishing the night in her bed.

What other option did I have? I could try to find someone in a bar, but you didn't really lie to the police in a murder case to protect a casual pickup.

I pulled over to the curb beside an all-night restaurant, planning to go in and talk to the waitress a lot. Give her a huge tip so she couldn't possibly forget me. But then, how would I explain why I had lied?

The restaurant was close to the river, a rundown area lined with crumbling warehouses. A police cruiser slowed down and pulled in behind the Porsche. The cop got out and I lowered the window.

"Anything wrong, Officer?" I asked. He was small, black, well-pressed.

"I was going to ask you the same thing, sir. This is not a good neighborhood."

"I was just trying to decide whether I wanted a hamburger."

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"Yes, sir," he said. I could hear the murmur of his radio. "Well, listen, I'd make up my mind, one way or the other. I wouldn't hang around out here if I were you."

I smiled, and gave him a thumbs-up. "Thanks," I said.

He got back in his cruiser and pulled out. I watched his lights turn left at the next intersection. And I knew what I was going to do.

I drove south on route 130 for about three quarters of an hour, and then turned east on a two-lane. Somewhere around eleven, I entered Clovis, New Jersey, and decided it was just what I was looking for.

The Clovis police station occupied a small two-story building beside the post office. The Red Lantern Bar was located about two blocks away, on the other side of the street.

I parked in a lighted spot close to the police station, walked to the bar, and went inside. It was smoky, subdued, and reeking with the smell of dead cigarettes and stale beer. Most of the action was over around the dart board.

I settled in at the bar and commenced drinking Scotch. I stayed with it until the bartender suggested I'd had enough, which usually wouldn't have taken long because I don't have much capacity for alcohol. But that night my mind stayed clear. Not my motor coordination, though. I paid up, eased off the stool, and negotiated my way back onto the street.

I turned right and moved methodically toward the police station, putting one foot in front of the other. When I got close, I added a little panache to my stagger, tried a couple of practice giggles to warm up, and lurched in through the front door.

A man with two stripes came out of a back room.

"Good evening, Officer," I said, with exaggerated formality and the widest grin I could manage, which was then pretty wide. "Can you give me directions to Atlantic City?"

The corporal shook his head sadly. "Do you have some identification, sir?"

"Yes I do," I said. "But I don't see why my name is any business of yours. I'm in a hurry."

He sighed. "Where are you from?"

"Two weeks from Sunday," I said. "I'm a time traveler."

11.

Sunday, November 27. Late evening.

Sgt. Lake was surprised and, I thought, disappointed to learn that I had been in jail on the night of the fire. She said that she understood why I had been reluctant to say anything, but admonished me on the virtues of being honest with law enforcement authorities.

I called Helen, looking forward to an evening of celebration. But I only

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got her recording machine. "Call me when you get in," I told it.

The call never came. Just before midnight, when I'd given up and was getting ready to go to bed, I noticed a white envelope on the kitchen table.

My name was printed on it in neat, spare characters.

Dear Dave (it read),

Shel is back! My Shel. The real one. He wants to take me off somewhere, and I don't know where, but I can't resist. Maybe we will live near the Parthenon, or maybe Paris during the 1920s. I don't know. But I do know you will be happy for me.

I will never forget you, Dave.

Love,

Helen

PS We left something for you. In the wardrobe.

I read it several times, and finally crumpled it.

They'd left the *Hermes*. They had positioned it carefully under the light, to achieve maximum effect. Not that it needed it.

I stood a long time admiring the piece. It was Michelangelo at his most brilliant. But it wasn't Helen.

I went downstairs and wandered through the house. It was empty, full of echoes and the sound of the wind. More desolate now than it had been when it was the only thing in the universe.

I remembered how Helen had sounded when she thought she was sending me back to sleep with another woman. And I wondered why I was so ready to give up.

I did some quick research, went back to the wardrobe, scarcely noticing the statue, and put on turn-of-the-century evening clothes.

Next stop: the Court Theater in Sloane Square, London, to watch the opening performance of *Man and Superman*.

You're damned right, Shelborne.

Time travelers never die. ●

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NEXT ISSUE

JUNE COVER STORY

Hugo- and Nebula-winner Mike Resnick brings one of the most talked-about and acclaimed series in recent science fiction history to a shattering conclusion, as he brings us the last Kirinyaga story, the compelling and poignant "The Land of Nod"—taking us to a soulless, overcivilized future Kenya to witness a weary Koriba's last battle, as he struggles with the death of his dreams, and, which is perhaps even harder, with the persistence of hope. This is the capstone of one of SF's major series, and is sure to be one of the year's major stories. Don't miss it!

TOP-FLIGHT PROFESSIONALS

James Patrick Kelly, one of our most popular authors, returns with a bittersweet study of what happens to those who falter and turn *back* from the challenge of space, in "Breakaway, Backdown"; critically acclaimed writer Paul Park makes his *Asimov's* debut with a razor-edged shocker that is sure to be one of the year's most powerful and controversial stories, in "The Last Homosexual"; Tony Daniel spins the story of a battle-weary combat veteran who returns from a bewilderingly strange high-tech future war only to face his greatest and most sinister challenge right at home, in the suspensful saga of "A Dry, Quiet War"; Robert Reed explores the possibility that when star-traveling aliens *do* finally contact us, it may not be our leader they want to be taken to, or our best and brightest that they're interested in, in the ingenious "Decency"; Nebula-winner Michael Bishop paints a disturbing picture of the intrusion of the fantastic into the everyday world, in "Allegra's Hand"; and Eliot Fintushel takes us to a seedy, second-rate motel where some very odd beings are locked in a cosmic battle to decide the fate of humanity, in the gonzo "Izzy at the Lucky Three."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column examines "The Power of Words (Part Two)," Paul Di Filippo brings us "On Books," plus an array of poems, cartoons, letters, and other features. Look for our June issue on sale on April 23, 1996.

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ON BOOKS

Moshe Feder

FOUR WAYS TO FORGIVENESS

by Ursula K. Le Guin
HarperPrism, $20.00 (hardcover)

It felt for a while to some of us as if Ursula K. Le Guin had left SF behind, and we were saddened, maybe even resentful. More recently, we've come to realize that she was just taking a vacation from science fiction for a while, feeling perhaps that she'd run out of things she needed SF to say. Thankfully, she's come back to us refreshed and is writing SF regularly again.

Though I'm not usually one to advocate authors writing endless extensions to the same series ad infinitum, I'd always felt there was more for us to discover in her Hainish universe. (It was introduced in the novels that first brought her to our attention and she continued to use it through *The Dispossessed.*) It seemed she'd barely scratched the surface. So I practically cheered out loud when I realized that, besides coming home to science fiction, she was now writing Hainish stories again. The four linked novellas here are among the wonderful results. Three of them appeared in this magazine—two of them Hugo nominees last year—and so should be familiar to you. Yet as a group they're worth another look for the effect they have when presented in four-part harmony.

All four stories concern the planets Werel and Yeowe and are set on one or the other. We also get to see a bit of Hain, the ancestral human motherworld. Werel has a culture and economy based on slavery. Historically, the dark-skinned peoples have dominated the lighter-skinned ones. (Le Guin makes no fuss about this twist on Terran history—which otherwise we might balk at as mere simplistic reversal—and why should she? From the Hainish perspective, Earth's experience can hardly be privileged. It is one world among thousands.) Werel colonized Yeowe, the next planet in toward their sun, about 365 years before the time of these stories, bringing slavery with it. A more diversified form of slavery developed on Yeowe, so that the lives of some slaves are slightly improved and others are even more miserable. It is on Yeowe that the revolt against slavery begins, turning into a thirty-year guerrilla War of Liberation that wears down the slave masters. Finally, with the negotiating help of the Ekumen (the federation of Hainish worlds), Yeowe wins independence.

In "Betrayals," (the story that didn't first appear in *Asimov's*), Yoss, a retired woman living in a humble hermitage in the marshes of Yeowe, helps Abberkam, an

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aged, disgraced chieftain, when he falls ill. She doesn't like him very much, or approve of his politics, but he's a neighbor and a human being. By the time another crisis comes, this time to her, the feelings between them have warmed.

"Forgiveness Day" is the story of Solly, a brilliant, headstrong young woman, the first Envoy of the Ekumen to the Werelian kingdom of Gatay. Her bodyguard and security chief, Teyeo, warns her against attending the public observances of the title holiday. She ignores him and they are both abducted. It's announced that they were killed in a terrorist explosion. Imprisoned for days in a miserable hole, they slowly begin to understand each other, respect each other and care for each other, despite the cultural divide between them.

"A Man of the People" takes us from the pueblo on Hain where Havzhiva is born and raised, through his community's shock when he decides to leave the traditional life behind to become a historian, on to Ve (the next planet out from Hain) where he attends the Ekumenical School, and finally to Yeowe, perforce leaving his old life behind, because of time dilation. Solly is, by now, the ambassador on Yeowe. She sends him as sub-envoy to Yotebber in the south. There he finds a new life using his position to help women claim an equal part in Yeowe's new age.

In "A Woman's Liberation," Rakam experiences a parallel sequence of wrenching transformations, as she moves from the exploitation and rape of a Werelian plantation, through brief freedom and re-enslavement to a more sustained freedom that allows her to begin to educate herself. With the Ekumen's help she escapes Werel and after further trials she begins to find her role as author, publisher and teacher in Yotebber, where she also begins a relationship with Havzhiva.

These are wonderful, engrossing stories and I am grateful for them. Presented together they reinforce each other, rounding and deepening our view of these two sad yet hopeful worlds and their people, much as did the two worlds of *The Dispossessed*. Despite their discreteness, the total effect of the four collected works is not much different from a novel's.

Yet as enjoyable as these are, one has to admit that, except in such secondary points as lovers being separated by time-dilation, they are not, in essence, very science fictional stories. Some may argue that the anthropology and sociology behind Le Guin's grasp of the social movements she's describing fill the bill. Yet these stories fail the test that asks whether you could tell essentially the same story to the same effect in a Terran contemporary or historical setting. Take "Forgiveness Day," for example. Is there really anything in its account of diplomacy and imprisonment that couldn't occur in some third-world country today? Couldn't something very much like "Betrayals" have been set in Norfolk's fens one hundred years ago?

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Even more surprising is that Le Guin seems to subscribe in these stories to what I've always called the Hollywood Theory of Romance. You've seen it in movie after movie. Take a man and a woman, they can be total strangers or they can know and hate each other, it doesn't matter. Put them in a situation where they are forced to spend lots of time together, preferably working together toward a common goal. Presto! Before the movie, or, here, the story, is over, they will be in love. I understand the commercial reasons this happens in the movies, and I guess this must happen sometimes in real life, but surely not with the predictability it does in the two cases here. As much as this appealed to the romantic side of me, I was still taken aback. Le Guin has always projected such toughness. I didn't expect to find her as gooey at the center as the rest of us.

Theoretical carping aside, I can't deny I enjoyed these stories and the afterword devoted to the planetary backgrounds. Indeed, I'm surprised that neither of the two nominated in '95 won a Hugo; they certainly outclassed the competition. I, for one, hope there'll be no more vacations from SF for Ursula Le Guin for the rest of a very long life.

LORDS AND LADIES

by Terry Pratchett
HarperPrism, $12.00
(trade paperback)

When faced with the existence of dangerous magical beings, one doesn't call them by name, for fear of summoning them. One doesn't choose a name expressive of one's actual feelings for fear of offending them. So it is that the malevolent elves of the Discworld are called "Lords and Ladies."

The citizens of the small, isolated mountain kingdom of Lancre haven't seen a real elf for a long time. So naturally their idea of elves is romanticized and sugar-coated. This is the lingering effect of elvish "glamour," which makes them magically appealing. Luckily, Granny Weatherwax (Have broomstick, will travel) does remember what they're like: dictatorial, inhumanly vicious, and pitilessly cruel. She has no intention of letting them back into Lancre.

Although enjoyable as a stand-alone, this is in fact a sequel to *Wyrd Sisters* and *Witches Abroad.* Magrat, formerly the youngest member of the coven in those books, has resigned upon her engagement to King Verence and strives mightily to adjust to the role of almost-Queen. Plans for the wedding advance oblivious of the looming elf threat, and then unbeknownst to the humans, become part of it.

Meanwhile, representing other books in the series, Archchancellor Ridcully of the Unseen University is on his way to Lancre to attend the royal wedding. He is delighted to have an excuse to revisit the scene of a fondly remembered period of his young manhood and is bringing our friend the Librarian (Ook!) along with him. Lancre is still as he remembers it, but he is

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in for some surprises, as, of course, are we. It probably *won't* surprise you that, with the help of Nanny Ogg, Granny Weatherwax manages, just barely, to show the elves what for and send them packing back beyond the guardian stones where they came from. It's the journey, not the destination, that makes these books fun, and the journey is as comedically eventful as ever.

Pratchett is a remarkably consistent writer, single-handedly proving that fantastic fiction and humor are not incompatible. For me, *Lords and Ladies* might have had one or two fewer chuckles than *Small Gods,* for you it might have more. Either way, you're sure to get your money's worth. Terry Pratchett's Discworld is a specific for the blues or the blahs. Take one as needed.

FAR FUTURES

edited by Gregory Benford
Tor Books, $23.95 (hardcover)

This is an anthology I might have commissioned, were I in a position to do so, since I've always loved stories set in the far future, and here we have five novellas that are just that.

Benford's fine introduction, "Looking Long," provides more than just the usual opening benediction. It's a cross between a monograph and a manifesto, outlining all the ways the universe may evolve over the remaining billions of years of its life, while suggesting that if the desire is there, humanity, or whatever humanity evolves into, could choose to have a role in it for aeons to come. He affirms thereby the literal possibility of what his contributors have imagined. It's no accident he invited only hard science writers to contribute. As remote as these stories are from us, Benford wants them all to be true.

Greg Bear's "Judgment Engine" is set at the end of time, over twelve billion years from now, when all the universe's remaining energy has been gathered for one purpose: the hope of seeding the next universe with an essence from this one. This audacious project is being carried out by entities that are conglomerations of thousands of formerly human minds. Smaller entities can be detached when necessary and one such is a protagonist of this story. It is a group of seven, temporarily occupying a single multi-legged metal body. Each of the seven also has access to numerous ancestral versions of itself, and so it is that when stumped by a problem they're facing, the group decides to revive a primitive ancestor of one of its components and bring to life the stored mind of a man from a time not much after our own. Perhaps he can offer the judgment they cannot. His task takes on a much more personal quality when he discovers that one of the other, hostile, group minds includes a version of his wife. All the while, of course, the universal clock is ticking to its end.

Bear has set himself a difficult task, and in many ways his results

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are impressive. The scenes he describes have genuine strangeness and wonder and I found myself picturing certain Frank R. Paul covers to get a handle on them. However, the decision to include characters originating close to our own time, while understandable—it gives readers a point of identification in a very confusing milieu—was, in my opinion, a mistake, maybe even a cop-out. This mistake is compounded when the story is eventually diverted to the merely human issues between the man and woman—conceivably touching if we knew more about them, but inescapably trivial in this context.

Is Bear trying to say that matters of the heart have their place even in the awesome frame in which he's put them here? Sorry, that's a wonderful romantic notion, but in the light of the last day as he himself has painted it, it can hardly be taken seriously. SF writers have been told for so long that they aren't good with people that they seem to feel compelled to show that they *can too* handle character and emotion and human interaction. Well, of course, they can, but they ought to have the genre pride, where appropriate, to assert their unique ability to deal with immensity and abstraction as no other literature can; if desired, without a human or emotion in sight.

Poul Anderson's "Genesis" is set at a far future time when a sort of galactic brain is beginning to come into existence. Its components are huge hybrid intelligences combining machine minds with human minds by the thousands or millions. Each world has such a tutelary mentality that is at once its whole population, its world's guardian and a node of the galactic mind in which all such beings are linked.

Gaia, the caretaker of Earth, has been behaving strangely, arguing that Earth should be allowed to die, even though it's within the power of the worldminds to save it. A physical emissary, Wayfarer, is dispatched to interface with her. Wayfarer in turn creates a subsystem in virtual human form, Christian, to carry out part of its investigations while it is busy with Gaia. She creates Laurinda to act as Christian's guide. Based on real people, they are fated to fall in love. While these two threads are going on, Anderson provides a third, concerned with a sea voyage of discovery undertaken by pre-industrial people of a roughly Viking level of development. These strands come together quite neatly in the revelation of what Gaia is up to.

At first, I was put off by the rather intrusive narrative voice Anderson had chosen, but as one adjusts to it and gets the different story elements sorted out, this novella ends up being quite satisfying. It makes an interesting companion to the Greg Bear, since the underlying assumptions (about machine-based, human-dominated multiplexed intelligences) are similar enough that it could be set earlier in the history of the same universe.

Donald Kingsbury is a brave man. Editor Benford is under con-

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tract to write a sequel to the Foundation series, but in "Historical Crisis" Kingsbury voluntarily picks up the gauntlet of writing in an Asimovian universe. Adopting only the thinnest of disguises for the familiar Foundation milieu allows him to use all the essentials he needs, including psychohistory itself, while giving him the freedom to add some elements of his own choosing—such as augmentation of the brain by wearable cybernetic devices, known as familiars.

Imagine the dilemma faced by a scholar when he finds himself suddenly deprived of that augmentation in retribution for violating the canons of the Fellowship of Pscholars. Eron Osa is in just that situation. As his memory recovers from the shock, he figures out that he's been judged a renegade, but without his "fam" he's helpless to comprehend the very work that got him into trouble! Acquisition of a black-market fam only complicates things further, when it proves to have the mind of its previous owner—a *real* outlaw psychohistorian—still trapped inside it. Also included, at no extra charge, is a unique accessory: a very assertive thirteen-year-old girl!

Kingsbury has succeeded brilliantly in catching the flavor of his honored model, and matches the best of it in pacing and in utilization of his conceptual resources. Isaac would have enjoyed this story and so will you.

Haldeman's "For White Hill" is by far the most affecting of the five stories here. It is a love story set about twelve hundred years in the future, an age of seeming heroic futility when humanity has been at war with the implacable Fwndyri for over four hundred years. The battle appears to have passed beyond the solar system, and so White Hill and Water Man, each of them artists, neither from Earth, meet there as a result of an artistic contest sponsored by the Council of Worlds.

Earth was laid waste by the Fwndyri. Nanophages literally took people apart cell by cell, and when all the human DNA was gone, the phages mutated and went after everything else. Our hero and heroine have backward-twisting DNA that makes them immune and so they are among the few who can brave the surface without protection. They visit famous spots around the globe in preparation for offering their competing designs for a grand monument to what was destroyed. Then, everywhere but in the barren park around the monument, Earth will be restored. The contest is put on hold when it is discovered that the Fwndyri weren't done when they sterilized Earth. They also tampered with the sun so that it will heat up and render the Earth permanently uninhabitable. Inevitably, cosmic events have their impact on helpless individuals.

For Haldeman, there is no conflict between SF setting and SF plot events and the creation of believable human characters who touch us accordingly. I don't think

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of twelve hundred years from now as being the "far future," but that can be overlooked when a story works.

"Larger than life" is the obvious description for Drake Merlin, hero of Charles Sheffield's "At the Eschaton," a story I ended up liking somewhat despite myself. Drake's wife, Anastasia, dies of cancer and Drake has her body cryonically preserved in the hope there will be a cure someday. A composer, he spends nine years working hard to make the money he'll need and arranging things so he'll have a good chance of being chosen for revival. Then, though nowhere near death himself, he has himself frozen to follow Ana into the future. His plan works, but the first time he is awakened medicine has not advanced enough to restore his beloved to life, and so he returns to the deep freeze. Sheffield shows us each of the successive awakenings and Drake's decisions to plunge ever farther into the future; indeed, as the title suggests, as far as you can go.

There's something old-fashioned about this story, though I can't quite figure out what—perhaps it's a certain schematic quality. Also, although echoes of his obsession can be found in real life, Drake Merlin is hardly a realistic character (or musician!). Nevertheless, this was the easiest story in the book to read and the hardest to put down. Sheffield is nothing if not a good storyteller.

Overall, *Far Futures,* in its high level of consistent quality and in its actual delivery of what its title promises, is one of the best original anthologies, and one of the best theme anthologies, to come along in quite some time.

AN EXALTATION OF LARKS

by Robert Reed
Tor Books, $21.95 (hardcover)

Jesse Aylesworth is editor-in-chief of the student newspaper at Warner College in the late 1970s. He's just published the biggest story in the paper's history, accusing the college president of embezzlement. Jesse's quite a ladies' man, but he's surprised when Sully Faulkner, a quietly pretty girl who'd previously kept to herself, begins to show an interest in him, starting on the snowy night when she helps him distribute the issue with the big story. Yet both the scandal and his new affair are soon overshadowed. The school appears to be cut off from outside by the blizzard, but Jesse comes to realize that they have been sequestered by something much more powerful than the weather.

Shifting between the form of a man and a giant turtle, a being from the end of time visits Jesse to announce that he is on a mission to recruit immortals, that Jesse is one of the chosen and that the change in him has already begun. Jesse suddenly realizes that he hasn't been hungry for a couple of days and can't remember the last time he used the bathroom. He suspects that Sully may be chosen as well, along with the reporter (an ex-girlfriend) who uncovered the

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scandal, and the college president himself. Later, the Turtle secures his promise to help in apprehending a freeloader, someone trying to steal immortality, thereby weakening the project to which immortality is ancillary, a project to reshape the very nature of the universe.

As long as Reed focuses on his student protagonists and their college environment, he's perfect. Having gone to college in the (somewhat earlier) '70s myself, I felt right at home. His handling of the Big Turtle isn't nearly as convincing, especially when explanations are being offered. I would suggest that he might have done better to put a less comic-booky icon at the center of his story. It doesn't help that the Turtle's dialogue tends to the cutesy and coy. All this slows down our acceptance of the cosmic significance of what's going on. There are other points as well when the book's level of realism seems to swerve to the slightly cartoony and back again; call it a blurring of the universe of discourse, a fluctuation in rhetorical voltage. As a result, plot events take on an arbitrary, unbelievable quality that leaks narrative power like a short circuit.

Still, Jesse's participation in the Turtle's manhunt, and what we see along the way, engages us and is often surprising, with the biggest surprise rightly saved for the very end. That ending, thanks to Reed's skill in building realistic characters, is genuinely moving.

I don't have to have read any of Reed's earlier books—which got good notices—to see that he's a talented writer, wherever this book may fall among them. It's clear he's already firmly in control of character and setting. If he can achieve the same control of tone and level of discourse, nothing can stop him.

SCIENCE FICTION: THE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA

by John Clute
Dorling Kindersley, $39.95
(oversize hardcover)

I was puzzled when I first heard about this book. John Clute is co-editor of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (the CD-ROM version of which I hope to review next time) and I couldn't imagine that he'd feel the need to do another one on his own. Once I saw the book, I understood. This is not really an encyclopedia (with alphabetized entries and so on) but a grand illustrated survey of the type in vogue from the mid- to the late '70s. Those books depended heavily on color reproductions of old pulp covers and varied widely in the amplitude and usefulness of their text. Here, with a knowledgeable and insightful critic providing the concepts, basic organization and text, and the expert DK art directors providing a slick, modern design, the result is quite the best thing of its kind I've ever seen.

The book is divided into eight chapters (large enough that other books might call them sections), and a number of those are in turn subdivided by decade. In "Chapter One—Future Visions," the empha

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sis is on artwork illustrating how various eras in the past imagined the future. "Chapter Two—Historical Context" offers "timelines" (a DK specialty) relating SF events to what was happening in the mass media, in the magazines and in the world. One can learn, for example, that in 1926 *Amazing Stories* was founded, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* was released and Robert Goddard first launched a liquid-fueled rocket. Whereas in 1977 *Star Wars* came out, the first boat people fled from Vietnam and this magazine was founded. As the timelines proceed, they are interrupted as appropriate by spreads devoted to particular themes that have come to prominence in various periods, such as lost worlds, future wars, robots, and satire. Chapter Three looks at influential magazines: *Asimov's* contributors, we are told, "are a pantheon lot."

In "Chapter Four—Major Authors" we come to the heart of the book, its largest single section (100 pages), with timelines charting books, themes and author debuts year by year (illustrated with photos of fascinating first or early editions). Even more valuable, we get Clute's profiles of the most prominent authors of each era, complete with bibliographies and embellished with images of the authors and their autographs. These are quite different from his author entries in *TESF*. Clute's brief essays on the various authors he's singled out are models of cogent critical insight applied with wit and justice.

"Chapter Five—Classic Titles" surveys the field from "early science fiction" to "classics of the golden age" and then by decade, starting with the fifties and continuing to the present. This chapter is essentially a collection of wonderful photos of books (with informative captions, naturally), again in first or early editions. The pulp covers that dominated the '70s survey volumes here give way to the hardcover jackets and paperback covers that are more meaningful to most of us and connect us immediately to the literary history Clute outlines. If nothing else, it's great fun to see what these look like, and to discover that books you bought back in the '70s or '80s are now classics too.

"Chapter Six—Graphic Works" is a brief look at illustrators and at U.S., European, and Japanese comics. It's the one area here that worst falls afoul of tokenism. The selection of illustrators is ridiculously small. A shame, since there's no comprehensive survey available (to my knowledge), but perhaps the cost or reproduction rights was a problem. The coverage of comics is a mere hint at what's out there, but at least that field is well-covered by its own books. Still, it would have been nice to have even a brief discussion of SF's role in comics and what that medium offers SF.

"Chapter Seven—Genre Film" gives us a quite substantial forty-two pages on its topic. If it can't replace books solely devoted to this colorful subject, it still offers enough to be genuinely useful.

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Over four hundred and fifty films are listed in chronological order with director, screenwriter, and running times. A brief synopsis and simple one-to-three star quality rating is provided for each.

"Chapter Eight—International Television" devotes successive chronological spreads to U.S., British and a combination of European and Japanese TV with some intervening pages devoted to little features on particularly noteworthy shows. With a mere twelve pages this is so skimpy it almost might have been left out. Of course the popularity of the subject prohibits that. The book then closes with a brief glossary and an index.

As you'd expect in a large and complex project of this kind, a few mistakes have made it through the checking process. For example, one caption describes the insignia on original "Star Trek" uniforms as being a "communication badge." Of course, that wasn't the case until the second series. At another point a picture identified as being *Omni* publisher Bob Guccione is actually novelist and Hugo-winning fanwriter David Langford. There are other errors, but on the whole, respectably few. I was more disappointed that a page couldn't be spared for fandom. There are some passing references to the subculture, but never an explanation of what it actually is.

As you can probably tell, I think this volume makes an excellent supplement to Clute's other project, the true encyclopedia, but it can be enjoyed just for the high-class browsing it offers. Its size and over twelve hundred color illustrations make it expensive, but if you appreciate books *about* SF or can use a handsome gift for someone who does, it's certainly worth it.

CETAGANDA

by Lois McMaster Bujold
Baen Books, $21.00 (hardcover)

Here's a book I'm sure has been eagerly awaited. Bujold has a legion of loyal fans, and rightly so; she delivers value for money every time. Her remarkable string of Hugo victories may make me a little uncomfortable, just because I'm not sure anyone should win so often (and, as I'm sure Lois would agree, there have been some other very worthy nominees), but that hasn't kept me from enjoying her books as much as anyone.

Bujold's books eat you alive. Not since Heinlein has a writer been able to capture a reader's attention as quickly and hold it as firmly as she does. Writers able to analyze her work and grasp how she does this would certainly be improving their own chances for success.

In terms of the series' internal chronology Miles Vorkosigan is twenty-two here, so the events of this book take place between those of *The Vor Game* and *Ethan of Athos*. The setting is Eta Ceta IV, homeworld of the large and wealthy Cetagandan empire with which the Barrayarans have warred in the past. They are at peace for the moment, and Miles and his cousin Ivan are sent as of-

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ficial envoys to the funeral of the Dowager Empress. There are diplomatic pitfalls at every step and, with someone seemingly playing nasty practical jokes on the two young Vor, literal ones as well.

Of course, fate doesn't even wait for Miles to arrive on the planet before putting trouble in his path. The pod taking them to the orbital transfer station is diverted to the wrong docking bay. There, for no evident reason, they are attacked by what appears to be an aged but vigorous man. Thinking they're disarming him, they relieve him of a curiously embellished rod. The function of this rod and its provenance are a mystery, but Miles begins to suspect the Barrayarans are being set up. It's soon clear that this is to be a detective story as much as a planetary adventure. As in *Borders of Infinity,* Miles will demonstrate considerable Sherlockian prowess.

The mystery just barely begins to unravel when, at one of the preliminary ceremonies of the days-long state funeral, Miles is contacted by one of the haut-women. These are the highest-ranking noble ladies of the Cetagandan empire, normally cloistered or hidden behind the opaque forcefields of their floating chairs, never seen by outsiders. She is Rian Degtiar, Handmaiden of the Star Creche, a member of the late empress's inner circle (supervising her staff of geneticists). She suspects he has the rod and wants it back. Then, just moments after the conclusion of his audience with her, the dead body of the odd person from whom he got the rod is found sprawled near the catafalque in a pool of blood.

When Miles meets Rian again, he refuses to return the rod, known as the Great Key, unless he can know with whom he is dealing. She consents to lower her shield. Miles expects her to be an old woman of the late empress's generation, but she is in fact a haut lady in her prime and her supernal beauty hits Miles like a physical blow. He finds himself on his knees without knowing how he got there, determined to solve their mutual problem and, like a knight, willing to give his life for her if necessary.

Well, just from this book's position in the Vorkosigan sequence we know that it doesn't prove necessary, but it *will* take all his legendary cleverness and luck for Miles to untangle this Cetagandan intrigue. The irony that he is doing this for people who were once his enemies and could be again is not lost on him, but he doesn't let it stop him, either.

It's this wry appreciation of life's little twists, as expressed through Miles, that makes these stories more than just deftly crafted entertainments. So *"Brava, Bujold!"* and thanks for this treat. Excuse me now while I go out and join the crowd in front of her house clamoring for more of the same. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

After a two-con(vention) week, the big Easter crunch. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700A, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

MARCH 1996

29-31—**Prisoners of the Knight.** For info, write: **23 Oriole Rd. #203, Toronto ON M4V 2E6.** Or phone: **(416) 925-9020** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Yorkdale ON (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn. Guests will include: Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. For "Forever Knight" fans.

29-31—**Magic Carpet Con. (706) 279-1657.** Comfort Inn, Chattanooga TN Filthy (hey, that's me!) and L. Fish.

APRIL 1996

4-7—**Australia Nat'l. Con. (09) 434-4167.** Kings Hotel, Perth Australia. B. Sterling, Pat Cadigan, S. McMullen.

5-7—**BaltiCon. (410) 563-2737.** Omni Hotel, Baltimore MD. Robert Jordan, Lubov, Marty Gear, Frank Hayes.

5-7—**MiniCon. (612) 333-7533.** Minneapolis MN. The emphasis will be on the history of science fiction fandom.

5-7—**NorwesCon. (206) 248-2010.** Red Lion, SeaTac Airport. A. C. Crispin, Tom Kidd, D. Valentine, Canterbury.

5-8—**UK Nat'l. Con. (E-mail) bmh@ee.ic.ac.uk.** Radisson Heathrow, London UK. Vernor Vinge, Colin Greenland.

12-13—**Research Triangle Park Book Fair, Box 5703, Raleigh NC 27650. (919) 755-0701.** Conv. Center. Fri. & Sat.

12-14—**Accelerate, 35 Sterry Rd., Dagenham RM10 8NT, UK. (01827) 64911.** Radisson Heathrow too; just stay on.

12-14—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (516) 632-6045.** SUNY campus. Geo. Alec Effinger. 4000 expected.

12-14—**StarFest, Box 24590, Denver CO 80224. (800) 733-8735 or (303) 671-8735.** Commercial Star Trek event.

13-14—**Maritime SF Festival, Box 46021, Halifax NS B3K 5V8. (800) 622-6199.** Ramada Renaissance. Trek guests.

19-21—**ConTroll, Box 740969, Houston TX 77274. (713) 895-9202.** Ramada Astrodome. H. Harrison, C. J. Cherryh.

19-21—**Name That Con: TutanCONmun/ConTut, Box 3064, Florissant MO 63032. (314) 773-6648.** Egyptian-themed.

19-21—**Creation, 411 N. Central Av., Glendale CA 91204. (818) 409-0960.** Pasadena CA. Commercial. Trek stars.

26-28—**DeepSouthCon, Box 1271, Brunswick GA 31521. (912) 638-1486.** Best Western, Jekyll Isl. GA. Turtledove.

AUGUST 1996

29-Sep. 2—**L. A. Con III, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. The 1996 World SF Convention.

AUGUST 1997

28-Sep. 1—**Lone Star Con 2, Box 27277, San Antonio TX 78755.** Marriotts. The 1997 World SF Convention.

AUGUST 1998

5-9—**BucConeer, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. (E-mail) baltimore98@access.digex.net.** Baltimore MD. WorldCon.

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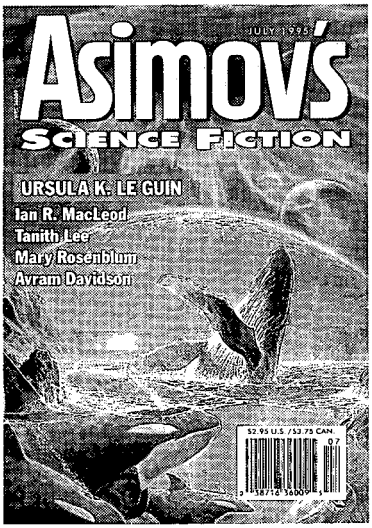

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